

Melting a Winter King

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Melting a Winter King

by [nj_1996](#)

Summary

Prince Shane Hollander arrives in the frozen kingdom of Rozanova as a political sacrifice, a foreign prince married off to a man raised to hate everything he represents. King Ilya Rozanov is all broad shoulders and dangerous confidence, yet beneath the armour is a heat that catches Shane off guard. Their wedding binds two nations in suspicion, but the nights behind closed doors begin to spark with something neither can ignore.

Shane fights to survive a hostile court, the relentless cold, and the weight of living among enemies. Ilya is brutal in public, but unexpectedly gentle in private, slowly becoming the one person Shane wants to trust. Fear and pride pull them apart at the worst possible moment, and when danger finally strikes from the shadows, every buried feeling breaks open.

Duty shifts into desire, then into something fierce and consuming. With tensions rising and loyalties tested, Shane and Ilya must decide if they can stand together as more than symbols of peace. This is a marriage that turns into longing, tenderness, and a slow burn that finally turns into fire, all within a kingdom that would rather see them fall than hold each other.

Notes

My first ever Hollanov fic! I'm about halfway through The Long Game now, and I just had to go and write!

Originally, I had planned for this to be a fun one shot. About 6-7k words in total. Then it extended to 12k. Then 20k. And now we have this 30k word behemoth of a one-shot. I apologize for absolutely nothing.

Anyway! I hope you enjoy it very, very much. Almost as much as I did writing it. Please leave a kudo and a comment if you do, would love to hear what you think! :D

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Snow fell in slow, deliberate flakes around him, each one drifting down towards the whitened soil like it had all the time in the world.

Shane had no more left.

The gates of Rozanova's capital loomed up ahead, carved from the darkest, obsidian stone and covered in snow and ice. Gigantic twin statues of roaring bears flanked the entrance gate; their jaws opened in perpetual challenge to all who dared oppose them. Far behind them, beyond the capital itself, rose the castle. A hulking crown of sharp spires, the windows glowing faintly with firelight like the multitude of eyes of a monster, watching him from the shadows.

Shane swallowed hard and tried to sit a little straighter in his saddle. It only increased the hurt in his spine. They had been riding through his damned frozen tundra for days now. The closer to the capital they finally got, the more Shane was convinced that both the snowfall and the perpetual wind were locked in everlasting combat about which had the sharper teeth. Even wrapped in the finest, warmest cloak that his tailors back in Hollandia could provide, Shane felt horrifically underdressed, horrifically cold, horrifically... foreign.

This was to be his home now.

His Kingdom.

His marriage.

Gods, what hells awaited him.

The escort from Hollandia slowly peeled away from his sides as they entered the gates, instantly replaced by an honour guard of Rozanovan guards on foot, dressed in white armour that hid them in the snows, and furs that Shane immediately became jealous of. He was unable to read their expressions; hidden by the helmets they wore that shielded them against the worst bite of the cold.

Their attention was anything but hidden. Shane could feel every pair of eyes in both crowd and guard following him, watching him. The hostility was palpable in the air. Weeks ago, their Kingdoms had still been mortal enemies, at war for over a generation. Now, their King was dead mere days after having signed the peace treaty, and their enemy was to become the new King's consort. He didn't blame them for their anger.

When he finally entered the castle walls and heard the frozen gate shut once more behind him, Shane let out a shaky breath. The prison cell had just closed behind him. There was no more escape possible now.

He dismounted, boots landing on solid stone so cold it bit right through the sole. The courtyard was vast and silent. Too silent.

Suddenly, a door burst open at the far end.

A man stepped out alone, unguarded, a man that Shane instantly recognised.

King Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov.

As he approached, he looked utterly invincible. He was so tall, Shane was convinced that he would barely be able to reach the man's chin with the top of his head. Broad in the shoulders in a way that made his heavy, furred, black coat hang like it would on the most powerful warrior kings. His hair was long and thick, light brown curls falling to about his shoulders where it had escaped the band he used to keep most of it together.

His bright, hazel eyes seemed to almost hypnotize Shane as he approached, and the King seemed to circle him a few times without speaking. His gaze was openly taking in Shane's frame – His strong thighs, broad chest, anxious hands picking at his gloves – before rising back to meet his eyes.

Everything about this man was relaxed. Loose. Confident. The absolute utter opposite of the extreme tension and nerves Shane felt in every fibre of his being.

He was doing this for peace, he told himself. For his Kingdom. For his family.

“So,” Ilya spoke, his voice a warm, thick-accented rumble in the language of Shane's homeland. “This is the Prince I marry.”

Shane suddenly froze as if startled by the sudden declaration. His cheeks flushed with heat, and he hated the small smirk that appeared on Ilya's face in response.

The King clicked his tongue, tilting his head as if he was judging whether or not to take a new riding horse.

“You are smaller than I expected, Hollander.”

Shane huffed. He was anything but small. In fact, he had always been considered quite tall back h-

“Pretty too, da?”

What.

“And nervous.”

Shane opened his mouth then. To deny. To retort. To breathe. But Ilya took that exact moment to step closer, reducing the distance between the both of them down to almost nothing. He could feel the heat radiating off the King, and he cursed himself for the thought at the back of his mind that told him to nuzzle into that heat and never leave it again.

“Relax, Prince.” Ilya said, looking down at Shane with a wicked smirk to his lips. “I do not bite.”

Another pause. The smile sharpened even further.

“Unless you ask me nicely.”

Shane realised two things at once. First, he was out of his depth with this man. Second, Ilya knew it too.

Three days. That was how long Shane had been pacing the stone guts of Rozanova’s castle, praying to every god he could think of that he wouldn’t freeze to death or embarrass himself too much before the wedding.

Sleep had been incredibly hard to come by, despite the exhaustion he was pretty sure now extended from his skin, down into muscle, down into the depths of his actual bones.

The bed was too hard. The air was too thin. The insane cold felt like a hand around his throat every time he tried to even take a breath. Every night he fell asleep shivering despite the layers of bedding and the fire in his hearth. Every morning, he woke with heat pounding behind his eyes.

He was foreign here. He was wrong here. He could feel it from the way the stones themselves seemed determined to sap every last bit of warmth from his body.

He hadn’t expected the loneliness to feel quite so sharp.

But he was determined not to give up. Not just because he could not, his father the King had been quite clear on that regard, but because he would not. He was Prince Shane of the House of Hollander, future King of Hollandia. Giving up was not something he did. Ever.

Despite everything, the rooms they had put him in at least showed something of a welcome. They were absolutely enormous, though scarcely decorated, like everything in this Kingdom seemed to have an air of unembellished simplicity to it. It made his footsteps echo with every step, like living in a giant cathedral built for someone larger than himself.

Frost framed the full-length mirror in his room despite the fire. His breath fogged it up every time he shaved. His only escapes from the cold were his baths. However, with the air in the castle at perpetual freezing, even those seemed not to last long enough in the slightest.

The Rozanovan tailors were the only people that came to see him daily. They moved around him in silent and determined efficiency, tugging at red and black fabrics that Shane didn’t fully understand the meaning of. He’d tried talking to them on the first day, but had quickly learned that none of them spoke a single word he could understand. That was, until Shane had pointed at the colours with a questioning look on his face.

“Consort colours.” One of the tailors had murmured back to him.

Shane had almost dropped the sleeve in shock. The words dug into his skin. He laid awake at night, thinking about them. What would Ilya expect of him? What would Shane expect of himself? Those words hadn’t left his mind for a moment.

Pretty. Nervous. Unless you ask me nicely.

Ilya himself had barely spoken to Shane since the courtyard. Meals were delivered to Shane in his rooms, and he really only saw the King when they passed each other in one of the many, many hallways of the enormous castle.

Ilya moved through them like a storm unleashed. He exuded unbridled confidence with every step. Every eye was on him at all times, every bow deep and reverent. He always seemed to catch it when Shane stared at him, too. And, since he now outranked the prince after his ascension, tended to wait patiently until Shane had given him a bow.

Shane couldn't fucking stand it.

Wherever he went in the castle, eyes followed him around. He had a pair of guard following him at all times, staring openly like they were weighing him as much as they were watching his safety. Servants dipped their heads and bowed no more than that, the hatred clearly visible in some of their eyes as they did as he asked.

Shane had the smallest amount of training in the Rozanovan language, and he could at least pick out a smattering of words from the whispers that were everywhere. His name, Ilya's, the word for 'enemy', the word 'marriage'.

He'd never felt more unsafe in his entire life, not even when fighting on the field of battle. At least there, you could look your opponent in the eye. Here, he could be stabbed in the back by a shadow at any passing moment.

On the morning of the third day, Shane was awoken by his servants, bathed, dressed, and readied for the actual ceremony.

His wedding day.

Gods help him all.

A knock finally echoed through his rooms, loud and flat against the main door. To Rozanovan guards entered without a reply. There wore the bear shaped helmets of the King's personal guard, and with their vizors raised, at least Shane could look them in the eyes as they brought him to his doom.

"It's time."

As they escorted him through the freezing, icy corridors, Shane felt absurdly small between their hulking frames. Both guards were almost the size of Ilya himself, and Shane continued to feel as hopelessly small as he had since they'd arrived here.

He tried conversation. The guards gave him nothing but the rhythm of their boots on the cold stone.

They finally opened a door that seemed to lead to the very heart of the castle, a room and an area that Shane hadn't been before. He nearly jumped when they closed the door behind him again without following him down, and he had to take a small moment to breathe before he continued, his mantra continuing in his head.

For Peace. For Hollandia. For my family.

The room he stepped into looked absolutely nothing like any Hollandian pre-wedding ritual space that he had ever heard described. There were no warm lanterns, no floral incense, no music drifting on soft air. Instead, the room felt like a winter mausoleum. The walls were bare stone, only covered with a large crest of Rozanova: A snarling bear crowned with icicles.

A narrow window cut high into the wall allowed a single stripe of cold light to spill across the floor, illuminating the only centrepiece: a wide stone basin filled with near-frozen water. Steam did rise from its surface... but only barely, as if the water itself were struggling to stay warm in this forsaken climate.

Shane exhaled slowly, the breath fogging in front of him.

A faint echo of his own footsteps answered back, hollow and lonely.

A Rozanovan priest that Shane hadn't seen before finally entered from the far side of the chamber. He was wrapped in dark furs, his beard braided with thin threads of silver. His bow was shallow, only barely deep enough not to be immediately interpreted as lacking respect.

"You will undergo the cleansing." The priest spoke, voice surprisingly clear in Shane's own language. "The cold water purifies the body before union. The oils-" He gestured to a collection of small metal vials next to the bowl of water. "Come from the land of Rozanova, blessed to bind you forever onwards under the King's protection. Finally, you will be dressed in the rightful colours of our land."

"The King's colours." Shane grumbled, unable to keep the bite from his voice.

The priest's expression did not even waver for a heartbeat. "As is proper."

Of course. Proper in Rozanova meant entirely bending to the will of the King. To Ilya. His lineage. His customs. His throne. Shane wondered whether a single part of this supposed wedding-ceremony would belong to him at all.

Attendants suddenly moved in, silent and brisk as they unfastened Shane's cloak, washed him with the cold water, applied the oils and finally dressed him up in the red and black of the King's consort. The scent of the oils was something sharp, a mixture of pine and smoke. He barely recognised himself when he glanced at his reflection in the metal bowl. The red and black they had draped over him look foreign. Heavy. It was like he had stepped into someone else's fate.

His breath stuttered then.

This was real.

This was happening.

There was no turning back now.

Under his breath came once again his mantra. "For Peace. For Hollandia. For my family."

The words felt thin and hollow in the cold air.

A single knock echoed through the room. An announcement.
The attends froze around him, and Shane's stomach dropped.

The door swung open without ceremony. And there he was.

Ilya filled the doorway like a force of nature, tall and unmovable, his wedding garments a dark, imposing cascade of black and blood-red layers embroidered with silver thread sharp enough to catch the light like blades. A fur cloak hung over one shoulder, a circlet of metal rested against his long curls.

His hazel eyes swept across the chamber, landed on Shane... and lingered.

Slowly, deliberately, Ilya stepped inside.

Shane felt suddenly aware of every inch of his still half-dressed state, the exposed skin, the cold oil glinting lightly on his collarbone. He fought every urge he had to cover himself under Ilya penetrating gaze.

Ilya made it anything but easy.

The King's lips turned up into a slow smile. Wicked. Knowing. A look that said he remembered their conversation from days earlier word for word, and he intended to make it worse.

"Mm." His voice was soft, amused, wrapped up thick in his heavy accent. "You clean up very well, Hollander."

Shane's breath caught in the back of his throat, and he felt Ilya staring as he swallowed it down.

Ilya's gaze dipped a fraction, over Shane's chest and back to his throat, over the red and black fabric clinging to him.

"Very well."

Heat once again rushed to Shane's face, a quick and involuntary flush that made Ilya's smile deepen even further.

"You should knock before you enter." Shane finally managed, barely.

Ilya clicked his tongue. "Why? Everything here is mine, no?"

He stepped closer and his voice dropped, low enough that only Shane could hear it.

"Including you... soon."

Shane's pulse started to pound so hard that he nearly had to take a step back. Ilya's grin told him that he noticed.

The priest then cleared his throat, breaking the moment, but the tension remained, stretched to the max between the both of them.

Ilya moved in again, stopping mere inches from touching Shane this time.
Close enough against for warmth to radiate through the chill.
Close enough for Shane to feel utterly out of his depth again.

“Ready for the ceremony, solnyshko?” Ilya muttered.

Shane swallowed. He wasn’t. Not remotely. But with Ilya standing this close, looking at him like that...

He continued to meet the King’s eyes as he finished pulling the last pieces of fabric up, letting attendants close the buttons.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” He finally whispered.

Ilya’s smirk was utterly devastating. “Good.”

He offered his hand.

And Shane, with the cold still sinking into his bones and a deeper and deeper foreign heat forming in his chest, took it.

The doors to the great hall were more than twice Ilya’s height and about three times as imposing.

They stood closed for a moment that stretched too long, carved with snarling bears and storm clouds and runes Shane still couldn’t read. Ilya’s hand was a warm weight at the centre of his back, steady and impossible to ignore.

“Breathe, milyy,” Ilya murmured, low enough that the guards flanking them wouldn’t hear.
“You faint, I have to carry you. Very dramatic. Too much work.”

Shane made a sound that was almost a laugh and almost a choke. “I’m not going to faint.”

“Good,” Ilya said. “Would be shame if you dropped in front of half my nobility.”

Before Shane could reply, the doors swung inward with a heavy groan.

Cold air rolled out to meet him. Of course it did.

The great hall of Rozanova was less a room and more a cavern cut into the heart of a mountain. Pillars of dark stone soared up into shadow, each carved with bears rearing on hind legs, wolves mid-leap, kings frozen in the moment of drawing their swords. Iron braziers spat mineral-infused blue-white fire along the walls, the strange light making armour gleam and furs look almost silver.

There were no flowers. No banners in Hollandia's colours. Just red and black and the dull, relentless gleam of metal.

Hundreds of people turned as one.

The sound of it — the rustle of heavy fabrics, the clink of jewellery — washed over him in a single wave. For a heartbeat, Shane had the absurd thought that he might actually be sick on the threshold.

He forced his shoulders back instead.

Ilya stepped forward with the easy confidence of a man who had never once doubted he belonged anywhere he chose to stand. His hand stayed at Shane's back, guiding him down the long aisle carved into the sea of bodies. On either side, nobles and officers and priests watched them pass from raised benches and long tables. Some dipped their heads, some did not bother.

Shane didn't need to understand the language to hear what was being said.

The sharp, low hiss of vrag — enemy.

The soft, sceptical lilt on Gollander — Hollander.

And another word, repeated often enough that even he could catch the shape of it now: consort.

His ears burned. His steps felt too loud on the polished black stone.

"Eyes up," Ilya murmured at his shoulder, the warmth of his breath brushing Shane's ear. "You are king's spouse almost. Do not stare at floor like scolded child."

"I'm trying not to trip." Shane said through his teeth.

Ilya's hand pressed slightly firmer against his back, not quite a touch of comfort and not quite a shove. "If you fall," he said. "I catch you."

It shouldn't have helped. It did anyway.

The far end of the hall rose into a broad platform, three wide steps up, where an altar-like arrangement had been constructed: a stone table, the great Rozanovan crest carved behind it, and a raised lectern where the high priest already stood waiting. The man was wrapped in layers of grey and black fur, his beard braided with metal beads that clicked faintly when he moved.

He inclined his head to Ilya with genuine respect. When his eyes slid to Shane, the bow that followed was shallower, more perfunctory.

"Your Majesty," he addressed Ilya in Rozanovan, voice carrying easily through the hall. "And the Hollander prince."

Ilya's fingers gave a brief, almost reassuring press. "Come." He said quietly.

They climbed the steps together.

On the stone table lay a metal-bound book, a shallow bowl of clear water, two heavy iron cuffs, open and waiting, and a length of braided red-and-black cord.

The sight of them made Shane's stomach clench.

The high priest spoke again, this time in a slower cadence as if for the benefit of ears not born to the language. It did not help Shane to understand what he was saying in the slightest. "By the laws of Rozanova," he said, "we gather to bind our king to his consort. To seal peace between Rozanova and Hollandia. To call the gods to witness." He then thankfully repeated his words for Shane to understand in his own language.

Shane's stomach twisted at the word bind.

He kept his chin up.

The priest turned a page in the heavy book, the sound of it echoing unnaturally loud. "Repeat after me," he told Shane, switching back to Rozanovan. "Ya, Sheyn Gollander..."

The syllables and odd pronunciation of his own name sat awkwardly on Shane's tongue. His mouth went dry.

Ilya leaned in, voice a low, steady murmur near his ear. "You can do this." He said, the words gentler and more encouraging than anything he'd said since Shane's arrival. "Slowly, da? No hurry."

Shane dragged in a breath that felt like swallowing snow and tried again.

"Ya, Sheyn... Gollander..." He mangled the consonants. Somewhere to his left, someone snorted softly.

Heat flared across his cheeks.

The priest's eyes flickered with disapproval.

Ilya's hand brushed his wrist, not touching the skin but close enough to steady. "Gollan-der," he whispered, soft enough no one else would hear. "Roll it. Good. Again."

Shane repeated it, the word stumbling out more cleanly this time. The hall did not laugh.

Line by line, the vow fought him. The structure was different to Hollandian pledges, full of references to land and winter and blood on the snow. His throat caught on the phrase for "till death." The Rozanovan syllables feeling too sharp, too final.

"Breathe, solnyshko." Ilya murmured when Shane's voice faltered outright. The endearment was a soft, unfamiliar weight in Shane's ear, though he had no idea what it meant. The tone was enough.

Shane forced the last words out. His heart hammered so loudly he almost didn't hear the priest's pronouncement that he had spoken correctly.

The hall did, though. There was a ripple, not quite approval, not quite disdain.

Then it was Ilya's turn.

If Shane had been awkward, Ilya was the opposite. His vow rolled out in smooth, deep phrases without a stumble, every word biting cleanly into the air. The braziers crackled as if listening. It wasn't just that he sounded confident; it was that he sounded inevitable, like winter coming down from the mountains, like the tide.

Some of the nobles lowered their heads. A few put fists over their hearts.

Shane watched his profile as he spoke — the set of his jaw, the way his eyes didn't leave the priest's, the tiny flicker when he said his father's name as part of the ancestral formula. There was real grief there, hidden under layers of duty and arrogance and humour.

It made his chest ache for a reason that had nothing to do with nerves.

When Ilya finished, the hall seemed to exhale.

The high priest lifted the shallow bowl from the altar and dipped his fingers in the water. He traced a wet, icy line across Ilya's brow, then turned to Shane and did the same. Shane bit back a flinch at the shock of cold.

The priest then lifted the first metal cuff — Ilya's — and closed it around the king's wrist with a solid, echoing click. The second cuff came a moment later, cold against Shane's skin as it was fastened into place.

Then the priest lifted the braided cord and tied it between them, binding the cuffs together.

"Bound," He intoned. "By word, by iron, by winter's blessing."

The weight on Shane's wrist felt startlingly real.

"By the gods and the law, you are joined," The priest declared. "Complete the rite."

There was a tiny, helpless pause where Shane's mind upended itself.

Complete the- *oh*.

The hall's attention sharpened with almost physical force.

Ilya moved first.

He stepped closer until their joined hands were caught between their chests, until Shane could see the faint flecks of green in his hazel eyes, the fine lines of tiredness at the corners that didn't quite fit his smirk. He didn't lunge or grab. He simply gave Shane the time to pull back if he wanted to.

Shane didn't move.

His lungs had stopped working at some point; he wasn't entirely sure when.

"Just a kiss, Hollander." Ilya said quietly, Rozanovan accent curling around the soft consonants. "Not execution. Relax."

"Hard to do that when half your court is watching," Shane muttered, and then flinched because he shouldn't have said that out loud.

Ilya's mouth tilted, almost fond. "Then think only of me."

Before Shane could argue, Ilya closed the last inch of space.

The kiss was not what he expected.

He'd braced for something possessive, punishing, meant to show ownership to the room. Instead Ilya's mouth brushed his in a slow, careful touch, barely there, the warmth of him a shock against the chill that had settled in Shane's bones. No pressure. No force. Just a question asked in the press of lips.

Shane's breath caught. One of his fingers curled reflexively against Ilya's.

It ended too quickly, a moment of heat cut off by the priest's booming voice.

"Witnessed!" The old man cried.

The hall erupted.

Applause crashed against him like a wave; hands clapping, boots stamping, a few isolated cheers. Not all of it was joyful. Some of it sounded grim, like soldiers honouring a difficult order. Shane's ears rang with it.

Ilya didn't let go of his hand.

They turned together, facing the sea of faces. The cord between their cuffs tugged faintly as they moved in unison. The weight of the kingdom pressed down on Shane's shoulders, heavy and suffocating.

He felt, absurdly, like he might laugh or cry or pass out.

Instead, he stood.

He kept his chin high, like his instructors had drilled into him. He met as many gazes as he could without flinching, even when he saw pure dislike in some of them, cold calculation in others.

If he was going to be picked apart, he would at least be upright when it happened.

The great doors at the far end of the hall boomed open again, letting in a blast of winter air that rippled through the braziers' flames. The signal, apparently, that the formal part of the ceremony was over. People began to shift, to stand, to form lines of approach for whatever public congratulations Rozanova considered appropriate.

Ilya leaned down, his words just for Shane.

"It is done, solnyshko," he said, the endearment a low, private warmth against the chill. "Now the real work begins."

A shiver ran down Shane's spine.

He wasn't entirely sure it was the cold.

If the ceremony had felt like stepping into the belly of a beast, the feast that followed felt like being swallowed whole.

The great hall was being transformed with alarming speed. Long tables were dragged into place, laden with slabs of roasted game, dark breads, spiced roots, enormous wheels of cheese. Torches were replaced, braziers stirred into brighter flame. Musicians assembled on a raised platform; their instruments carved from dark wood and animal horn. The music they produced was nothing like Hollandia's bright strings; Rozanovan music throbbed from the chest, all low drums and sharp, mournful violin that curled through the hall like wind through a winter forest.

People cheered when Ilya joined in on the festivities.

They did not cheer for Shane.

He walked at Ilya's side as required, the red-black cord still linking their wrists, though it had been loosened for easier movement. The iron cuff rubbed cold against his skin with every step. Eyes followed him everywhere. Some curious. Some hostile. Some calculating in a way that made the back of his neck itch.

Servants poured deep red liquor into carved wooden cups. Toasts rang out — to peace, to Rozanova, to King Ilya — and one perfunctory toast to 'the consort', delivered with a smile that didn't touch the man's eyes. Shane drank what he was offered, though each sip tasted like smoke and berries and nerves.

Ilya, at least, looked in his element. Seated at the head of the long table, he listened to speeches with an expression of polite boredom, answering with a nod, a quirk of amusement, a dry remark that made his nobles laugh louder than necessary.

He ate.

He drank.

He enjoyed himself wherever possible.

But he stayed close.

Every time Shane's gaze flicked toward him, Ilya's hand would shift slightly; a brush of fingers against the back of Shane's knuckles, a steadying weight on the thigh of their joined legs under the table. Small touches. Quiet touches. Possessive in a way that wasn't frightening, only... grounding.

And yet the pressure of the hall remained. Every time Shane lifted his eyes, someone was watching.

When the musicians struck up a livelier song — though lively in Rozanova still meant something grim and driving — a few nobles danced. Others argued politics loudly over their plates. A pair of officers compared scars. The entire room smelled of fire, spiced meat, sweat, and cold air drifting from the cracks in the old stone.

Shane's head swam with exhaustion long before the meal ended, both from everything that had happened that day, as well as trying to follow anything that was said in Rozanavan around him.

Ilya noticed.

He leaned in, lips brushing Shane's ear as if whispering scandal, not mercy. "Enough," He murmured. "You are falling asleep sitting up."

"I'm fine." Shane lied, because he wasn't about to admit weakness in front of a hall full of strangers.

"You are not." Ilya said, with that infuriating combination of arrogance and accuracy. He rose smoothly, tugging Shane with him by the cord. "We retire. They will not protest."

He was right. They didn't.

They bowed.

Shane tried not to flinch at the weight of their stares as they left.

The moment the heavy wooden door of their shared chambers closed behind them, the world went blessedly quiet.

The silence hit him like warm water, though the room itself was no warmer than the rest of the castle. A single fire burned in the hearth, its embers casting long shadows across carved beams and furs draped over stone. The bed was enormous—far too large, far too opulent—dressed in red and black blankets that looked heavier than armour.

Shane stopped just past the threshold, heart thudding in his chest.

Ilya didn't rush him.

He moved past Shane instead, shrugging off his ceremonial cloak and then, without hesitation, pulling his shirt over his head as well. The fabric fell to the floor in a careless

heap. For a moment, all Shane could do was stare breathlessly.

The cold didn't seem to notice Ilya's bare skin, nor did he seem to notice the cold. His shoulders were broad and carved like something a sculptor would quit their trade over; muscles shifting under pale skin, a faint scattering of freckles across his collarbone catching the firelight. The iron cuff on his wrist drew the eye down his strong forearm, the lines of him sharp and powerful and impossibly confident.

Shane's breath seemed utterly stuck in his throat.

He told himself to look away.

He did not.

Ilya reached up and removed the circlet next, setting it on a small table with a soft clink, seemingly completely unaware, or uncaring, of the way Shane was staring at him like he'd been struck between the ribs.

Then Ilya turned back toward him.

The wicked smirk Shane had come to expect wasn't there.

The teasing wasn't there.

"Do not look like that." Ilya said quietly. "I am not going to take you apart tonight."

Shane blinked, throat suddenly working again. "...You're not?"

Ilya huffed a soft laugh. "No. It is wedding night, da, but I am not barbarian. No need to fuck just because law says we married." His mouth twitched, eyes glinting. "No one will check sheets tomorrow. Well-" He paused, tilting his head as if reconsidering. "Old General Makarin might. He likes tradition. Very nosy man."

Shane made a strangled sound.

Ilya grinned. "If he does, I cut off his head and throw him in snowbank. Problem solved."

Despite himself, Shane laughed weakly. "That's not funny."

"It is little funny," Ilya said, holding a thumb and forefinger a fraction apart. "Tiny. Like you."

Shane bristled. "I am not li-"

Ilya cut him off with a lazy wave. "Yes, yes. Very tall for Hollandian. Still tiny to me."

Shane was too tired to argue. His shoulders slumped and he let out a breath that betrayed more than he cared to admit about how he was really feeling.

The change in Ilya's expression was instant; amusement softening into something quieter.

“You look exhausted, Hollander.” He said. “Come. Take off these ridiculous wedding clothes.”

Shane hesitated, fingers twitching at the ties of his outermost layer.

Ilya noticed immediately.

He lifted both hands in surrender. “I turn around, da? You undress. I do nothing unless you ask.”

Shane’s face flooded with heat. “I’m not asking.”

“Then I do nothing. Problem solved again. I am very good at this.” Ilya said simply, and turned his back.

Shane exhaled shakily and changed as quickly as he could, trying not to think about how his hands trembled or how acutely aware he was of Ilya standing at the other end of the room. Shirtless. Looking like that. When he finished, dressed in a soft linen shirt and trousers, he said, “You can turn around.”

Ilya did.

And froze.

There was a breath, just a single one, where Ilya looked genuinely startled. Not smug, not teasing, not kingly. Just... struck.

“You...” He blinked, the corner of his mouth lifting slowly. “You look beautiful, solnyshko.”

Shane’s breath snagged in his throat. “I-no, I-I look tired. I am tired. I am a mess.”

“Beautiful.” Ilya repeated, stepping closer but stopping before entering Shane’s space. “Beautiful when tired. Beautiful when shivering. Beautiful when angry at problem solving new husband.” His voice softened. “Beautiful when you try pretending you are not scared of situation.”

Shane gripped the hem of his shirt. “I’m not-”

“You are,” Ilya said gently. “You are in foreign land of enemy. Married to man you don’t know. Not able to talk to people. And still you stand. I like that about you.”

Shane swallowed hard. “You’re saying that just to-”

“To what?” Ilya asked. “Seduce you? Make you swoon into my arms?” He snorted. “Please. If I wanted that, I would say better lines than this.”

Shane huffed something that wasn’t quite amusement and wasn’t quite disbelief.

Ilya gestured toward the bed. “You take left. I take right. Do not worry, solnyshko. I will not touch you.”

Something in the phrasing—not a joke, not a taunt, just a promise—made Shane’s throat go tight.

They climbed into the bed, carefully, cautiously, keeping a polite opening of space between them. The fire crackled softly in the hearth. Wind howled faintly through some high corridor. Shane lay stiff on his back at first, staring up at the heavy beams overhead.

Then he felt it.

A slow, warm settling of the mattress next to him.

Ilya lying down. Turning onto his side. Facing away.

Giving him space.

For a moment Shane lay frozen, struck by a strange, unexpected ache. Not fear. Not desire. Just... the crushing exhaustion of a man who had held himself upright for too long.

He turned onto his side as well.

Back to back.

Then he felt something else.

He was close enough to feel the heat of Ilya’s body through the blankets. Far enough that they weren’t touching, but close enough that the additional warmth helped to slowly relax his entire body, muscles finally relaxing slightly after weeks of continued tension.

Something eased inside him.

Shane closed his eyes.

The last thing he heard before sleep dragged him under was Ilya’s low voice in the darkness, softer than he’d ever heard it:

“Rest, solnyshko. You are safe with me.”

Shane fell asleep before he could decide whether or not he believed him.

Shane woke slowly, the way one wakes from a dream that refuses to let go.

Warmth.

That was the first thing he registered.

Not the relentless cold that clawed through every corridor of the castle, not the knife-edge air that bit his lungs every time he breathed, but warmth. Heavy, encompassing, steady warmth, wrapped around him like a second blanket.

It took a moment for his sleep-fogged brain to understand why.

He was being held.

An arm — strong, muscled, unmistakably Rozanovan — lay draped across his waist. A broad, bare chest pressed against his back. A slow, even breath warmed the curve of his neck. And his legs... Saints, his legs were tangled with someone else's.

Shane's heart sprang up into his throat.

He wasn't alone.

He was in Ilya's arms.

His eyes flew open, then immediately squeezed shut again as heat flooded his face. Because the second thing he registered was... worse.

He was hard.

Painfully, embarrassingly hard, pressed into the soft linen of his trousers, his body throbbing with the kind of morning urgency he had absolutely not signed up for on the day after marrying a man he barely understood.

Oh gods.

Oh no.

Oh no, no, no-

He tried to shift subtly, to create some space between his traitorously awake body and Ilya's very solid one.

He failed.

Ilya stirred behind him.

Shane froze like a man about to be run through on the battlefield.

A soft sound — a low hum, almost a purr — rumbled against Shane's spine as Ilya's arm tightened just a fraction, pulling him closer with the unconscious strength of someone who slept like a mountain.

Then Ilya spoke, voice thick with sleep, warm and deep enough to vibrate through Shane's ribs.

"Good morning... solnyshko."

Shane wished the earth would split open and swallow him whole.

"G-good morning." He attempted, the words cracking like ice.

Ilya didn't release him. If anything, he shifted even closer, nuzzling lightly into Shane's shoulder, breath brushing skin that had no right to be that sensitive.

And then, because the universe hated him, Ilya's hand — big, warm, roughened from years upon years of swordplay — slid from his waist down just an inch too far, fingers grazing the top of Shane's hip.

Shane's whole body jolted.

He choked on a noise that was absolutely not dignified.

Ilya stilled.

Then, lazily as if he had all the time in the world, he spoke again, voice lower now, amused in a way Shane recognized instantly and dreaded in equal measure.

"...Milyy." He murmured into Shane's skin. "Are you waking up hard next to your husband?"

Shane made another strangled sound, burying his burning face into the pillow.

"I-I can't fucking control it." He hissed. "It's just... morning... body things... stop talking..."

Ilya chuckled, soft and warm and far too pleased.

"Is natural, Hollander." He said, hand rubbing a slow, careful circle on Shane's hip. "Means you slept well. Better than before."

Shane swallowed hard. "Ilya..."

"Da?" Ilya prompted, still half-asleep, still wrapped around him like he had absolutely no intention of letting go.

Shane's voice went thin. "Could you not... comment on it?"

Ilya hummed thoughtfully.

"No." He said immediately, with infuriating honesty. "You look too beautiful not to comment on all about you."

Shane's pulse tripped, and his heart started pounding hard enough that he was sure Ilya was aware of it, too.

"What?! I- I do not-"

"Beautiful when you sleep," Ilya continued, unbothered by Shane's sputtering. "Beautiful now. Hair messy, cheeks pink, freckles all...How you say? Making cute face." His thumb brushed that same circle over Shane's hip again, slow, almost reverent. "Makes me want to keep looking at you."

Shane bit down on his lip hard enough to hurt.

He didn't trust his voice.
He barely trusted his heartbeat.

Ilya finally loosened his hold enough that Shane could roll onto his back if he wanted. But Shane stayed where he was; pressed against the warmth of his husband, blushing like a fool, body still stubbornly awake.

Outside, the wind howled.
Inside, Ilya's breath was steady and warm on his neck, causing goosebumps to form every time it hit.

"Go back to sleep now, solnyshko," Ilya murmured. "Is still early. I will keep you warm."

Shane swallowed hard, heat curling low in his belly at the quiet promise wrapped in those words.

For the first time since entering Rozanova, he believed him.

Two weeks later, the castle no longer felt like a tomb.

It was still carved from cold and silence. It still watched him with the eyes of a people who didn't yet trust him. But Shane had grown up inside a palace; a different climate, a different court, a different set of expectations, but a court nonetheless. He recognized the rhythms. He recognized the hierarchy. He knew how to walk into a room with his shoulders squared and his chin lifted, even when his stomach knotted.

And he was learning, slowly, how to breathe in Rozanova without shaking.

He woke before sunrise, the faint blue-grey light of winter creeping around the curtains. The bed was still warm on one side where Ilya had slept; a large, unmistakable hollow of heat in an otherwise frigid world. Shane touched it once with his fingertips.

It was embarrassing, how much he missed it the moment he moved away.

He stood, stretching carefully. His muscles were sore from training the day before, but a good, familiar soreness. His balance was off on the ice-coated stones, and the cold made his joints stiffen faster than they ever had back home, but he could still handle a sword. Still move with purpose. Still find his footing amid unfamiliar ground.

Being a Hollander prince meant being raised to stand your ground, even when your boots slipped.

He dressed with quiet efficiency, pulled on fur-lined boots, and headed to his language lesson.

Master Vorin was already waiting.

He reminded Shane of Hollandia's old archivists: sharp-eyed, rigid-spined, deeply offended by imprecision. But unlike home, here the stakes felt higher. Every incorrect word was another reminder of how far outside Rozanovan life he still was.

"You are on time." Vorin said, glancing at the clock with faint surprise. "Better."

"I'm always on time." Shane replied, taking his seat with the smooth ease drilled into him by years of royal expectation. "It's you who sometimes start early."

Vorin sniffed. "In Rozanova, early is polite."

Shane let that one go. Pick your battles and all that.

They worked through verb cases, rotating nouns, and the baffling Rozanovan habit of assigning emotional subtext to grammatical endings. Shane's tongue adjusted faster now. His ear caught more nuances. He wasn't fluent, not even close to it, but at least the words no longer felt like stones in his mouth.

Still, Vorin corrected him mercilessly.

"Again," The tutor insisted, frowning. "You sound like drunk goose."

Shane stared him down, calm, practiced, royally. "Master Vorin, with respect, all geese sound drunk."

Vorin blinked. "...This is true. Continue."

They were halfway through a new set of phrases when the door opened without knocking.

Shane didn't need to turn to know who it was. Ilya's presence filled space as surely as a bonfire in a dark room.

"Good morning, Master Vorin." Ilya drawled in Hollandian. "My husband still alive? Or did you kill him with grammar?"

"Not yet, Your Majesty." Vorin said dryly.

Ilya moved behind Shane, leaning down to glance at the parchment. Shane straightened automatically; not from fear, just from awareness.

"Say something for me." Ilya murmured, lips near Shane's ear.

Shane cleared his throat, recalling one of the sentences. "Etot zamok kholodnyy."

Vorin nodded. A level of praise previously unseen in the Rozanovan court. Ilya lifted a brow. "The castle is cold? You have understatement disease now." He tapped the page. "Say: 'The king is warm.'"

Vorin actually choked on air. "Your Majesty-"

Shane set his jaw. “Ilya.”

“Yes?” Ilya asked innocently.

“I am not saying that.”

“You are prince and consort.” Ilya said. “Not coward. Say it.”

“No.”

Ilya grinned, broad and wicked. “One day you will.”

Shane held his ground — a tiny victory — and the king’s grin only widened.

Court went better than Shane expected.

He had been raised for politics, after all. Negotiations, disputes, etiquette; these were languages he understood even when he didn’t understand specific words. He watched the way Ilya ruled, the rhythm of questions and answers, the way respect pooled around him like warm breath in a frozen room.

And Shane knew how to stand beside him without shrinking.

He followed Rozanovan protocol as best he could: the holds of his hands, the depth of bows, the order of precedence. He made two small mistakes: a bow held half a second too long to a minor noble, and addressing a military officer with the wrong formality, but he recovered smoothly, offering apologies that landed correctly.

Even the court noticed the difference, though not all.

A noble sneered. “Does this Hollander prince actually understand enough of our customs to advise the king?”

Shane did not let his expression shift.

Ilya did.

The king’s voice chilled several degrees. “My consort is Crown Prince of Hollandia. Trained from birth for diplomacy. He learns our customs faster than you learned to use a damn fork.”

Murmurs rippled.

Then — to Shane’s and the room’s shock — Ilya turned to him, in front of everyone. “Solnyshko,” He said calmly, “what do you think of the western tariffs?”

It was a test, yes. But not cruel. Not mocking.

Shane inhaled, straightened, and answered with the quiet command of someone raised to speak for a crown.

“High tariffs will drive grain into black markets.” He said, voice strong. “Too low, and we drain the coffers. Lower them for one season. Review supply again in the spring. Reward compliance. Punish hoarding.”

There was a beat of stunned silence.

Then Lord Terek inclined his head. “A wise strategy, Your Majesty.” He said, tightly.

Ilya’s gaze smouldered with pleased pride.

“See?” He spoke. “My consort understands well.”

Shane’s pulse thrummed.

The training yard was less forgiving.

Shane could fight. He had trained with blades since childhood. He could disarm most of Hollandia’s young nobles in under ten seconds. But Rozanovan ice was not Hollandian stone.

His footwork lagged. His balance wavered. His fingers stiffened more quickly than he liked to admit, and the sword felt heavier in the cold.

Still, he fought.

Ilya advanced on him in a friendly sparring match, and Shane parried with clean, practiced technique... until the ice betrayed him. His boot slid. His centre of gravity dropped.

He would’ve gone down if a strong hand hadn’t caught him around the waist.

“Careful, solnyshko.” Ilya murmured against his ear.

Shane’s breath stuttered.

“I’m fine.” He said, steadying himself.

“You are prince,” Ilya replied, amused. “Not ice skater.”

Shane glared at him. Then lunged again. Landed a hit this time.

The soldiers clapped. Not mockingly. Approving.

He stood taller after that.

Later, back in their chambers, Shane sat on the bench by the hearth, warmed by the fire but worn from the day. He’d changed into soft trousers and a shirt, hair damp from a quick wash.

The door opened.

Ilya entered shirtless again, shaking snow from his curls, looking like winter had sculpted him and fire had warmed him. Shane's gaze jolted downward before he yanked it back up.

"How was your day?" Ilya asked, settling across from him. "Vorin says you make full sentences all by yourself. I am... very proud."

Shane tried for composure. "It was fine. Court was... less terrible than expected. And at least I didn't die on the ice."

"Only almost." Ilya said. "But you moved well. Strong. You looked like prince you are."

Shane blinked, throat tightening at the sincerity beneath the teasing.

"I'm trying." He said quietly, not sure why the admission felt so vulnerable. "It's harder here. Foreign. Different. I struggle."

Ilya studied him, expression softening in a way few ever saw.

"I know." He said. "I see how hard you work. I did worse my first week as king. Much worse. You are doing better than you think."

Warmth bloomed in Shane's chest, deeper than the fire, deeper than the blankets, deeper than he'd expected.

"I... actually like being here more than I thought I would." Shane said quietly.

"With me?" Ilya asked, voice low.

Shane swallowed. "... Yes."

Ilya's smile lit up his whole face; slow, triumphant, almost shy underneath the swagger.

"Good." He said, voice like velvet. "Very good."

They changed for bed, backs politely turned. When they lay down, the space between them felt smaller.

Comfortable.

Chosen.

When Ilya reached out, it was to gently take Shane's hand in his own, bringing it up to his lips to place the gentlest of kisses on the palm.

"Goodnight, solnyshko." Ilya murmured.

Shane's heart flipped.

"Goodnight." He whispered back.

He fell asleep thinking, for the first time, that he was finding a real place in Rozanova.

And that he wasn't finding it alone.

The letter found him at breakfast.

He had claimed a small corner of the lesser hall as his own over the past weeks; a seat near one of the narrow windows where pale winter light squeezed through thick glass, far enough from the main table that he could breathe, close enough not to be rude. A servant had just set down a trencher of bread and something that passed for porridge when a shadow fell over the table.

"Highness," the man said, bowing just enough to be respectful. The Hollandian blue of his cloak cut through all the Rozanovan greys and reds like a wound. "A dispatch from your father."

Shane's stomach did something tight and complicated.

He wiped his hands on a napkin before reaching out, the motion automatic, princely. The wax seal bore the Hollandian crest; familiar, sharp-edged, suddenly foreign and home all at once. He murmured thanks, watched the messenger withdraw, and sat with the letter unbroken for a long breath.

The hall hummed around him. Cutlery clinked. Fire popped. Somewhere, a dog barked. None of it felt quite real.

He broke the seal.

The script inside was neat and firm. His father's hand. Each stroke pressed hard enough to show on the back of the parchment.

My son,

It began with pleasantries and formalities; health, weather, the usual dance of ink and distance. He read them quickly, eyes skimming for the weight that he knew was coming. It arrived in the third paragraph.

The treaty has been received with cautious optimism. To ensure its stability, it is vital that Rozanova demonstrate its earnestness. A reduction in their troop presence along our shared border, paired with favourable trade adjustments regarding grain and iron, would reassure our people that this peace is more than words.

Shane's jaw tightened.

He read the lines again. Then again.

Underneath the polite phrasing, he could hear his father's voice: Push. See how far he bends. Find out what this new king can afford to give up.

There was more.

You are our eyes there, the letter continued. Our voice. Remember where your loyalties lie, and do not forget the weight of the crown you were born beneath. You are my son before you are anyone's consort, and one day, Hollandia shall be yours.

He felt that last sentence like the edge of a blade at the back of his neck.

For a moment, he just sat there, the words swimming. Something in his chest pulled in two directions, Hollandia on one side, Rozanova on the other, both heavy enough to hurt.

“Highness?”

He blinked.

One of the servants lingered nearby with the tea pot. Shane swallowed and gestured absently for more, folding the letter carefully. His hands looked very steady. That was something, at least.

He finished his breakfast mechanically, tasting nothing, then slipped the letter into his cloak and went to find Ilya.

If anyone would know how to handle this, it would be him. He was the king here. Rozanova's king. Shane was not a messenger, not a pawn; he refused to be used as such. He would put the letter on Ilya's desk, look him in the eye, and ask what they would do about it together.

That was what this was supposed to be, wasn't it? A partnership. A marriage. A shared future.

His boots rang hollow on the stone as he climbed to the solar.

The solar was somehow actually warm when he stepped inside. The fire in the corner threw a steady orange light across the room, softening the hard lines of the stone walls. A scattering of parchment lay across the central table like fallen leaves. Ilya stood over them, one hand braced on the wood, shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows, curls damp from a recent wash and pushed back from his face.

He looked tired. Not dangerously so, just worn at the edges in a way Shane was starting to recognise, the set of his shoulders a fraction lower, the shadows under his eyes a shade darker.

For a heartbeat, Shane just watched him, something like fondness twisting under his ribs despite the letter burning a hole in his cloak.

“Ilya?” he said softly.

Grey-specked hazel eyes lifted, flicked automatically to the sound of his voice. They warmed by reflex; the corners of Ilya's mouth twitched up.

“Solnyshko.” He said, and the word slid over Shane like heat. “You escape Vorin early today? Did he die of your accent at last?”

The smile that wanted to answer didn't quite make it to Shane's mouth. He reached into his cloak instead, fingers brushing the sealed edge of the parchment.

"I got a dispatch from Hollandia." He said. "From my father."

Something in Ilya's posture stiffened. Not much. Just enough that Shane saw it.

He held the letter out.

"I thought you should see it." He added, because that mattered. He was offering this, not hiding it.

Ilya studied his face for a second, then took the parchment with two fingers.

"Of course." He said. "Let us see what wise and noble demands your father sends across snow now."

The words were light. The tone wasn't.

Shane's throat felt dry.

He watched as Ilya broke the seal, unfolded the letter, and began to read.

The silence lengthened.

Ilya's gaze moved steadily across the page. Once. Twice. His jaw hardened, the muscles flickering. A small line appeared between his brows. The hand not holding the parchment curled slowly into a fist on the table.

Shane shifted his weight, heat crawling into his neck.

"Well?" He asked carefully.

Ilya lifted his eyes.

Something was shuttered there now. Something closed.

"So," He said, voice softer than before, but layered with the softness of snow hiding the solid stone underneath. "Hollandia sends orders."

Shane felt the words dig under his skin. "They're not orders." He said, keeping his tone even by sheer effort. "They're concerns. And requests. We knew they'd want to secure their position after the treaty. I thought it was better to show you than not."

"Concerns." Ilya repeated, in a tone that could have carved ice. He looked back down at the parchment. "Reduction of troop presence on border. Adjustment of tariffs in Hollandia's favour. Promises about where my army may and may not move."

His mouth twisted.

"Requests, yes," He went on. "Written with very polite ink."

Shane took a breath. “We can say no. Or propose something different. I’m not bringing this because I agree with it, I’m bringing it because it exists. Because my father expects an answer.”

“Da.” Ilya said. He set the letter down very carefully on the table. “Your father expects an answer. From his son. His eyes. Who now shares my bed and my court.”

There was an edge there Shane had never heard from him before, not even in the arena of politics. It wasn’t the sharp, amused blade of banter. It was heavier. Duller. Meant to bruise rather than cut.

He felt his own temper stir, fragile and defensive.

“I’m not his spy.” He said quietly.

“Are you not?” Ilya’s gaze snapped back to him. “He writes: ‘You are our eyes there. Our voice.’ He writes: ‘Remember where your loyalties lie.’” His accent thickened on the last phrase, like the words themselves offended his tongue. “He reminds you whose son you are.”

“He doesn’t need to remind me.” Shane snapped, before he could stop himself. “I know whose son I am. I know where I come from.”

“Good,” Ilya said. “Then you know what this letter is.”

“It’s diplomacy,” Shane said. “Ugly diplomacy, but not unusual. You know that. You’ve dealt with worse from other courts.”

“I have,” Ilya agreed. “From other courts. From men who sent ambassadors to demand my concessions.” His eyes were very hard now. “Not from the father of my husband, who sends those demands through him.”

Shane flinched.

“I brought it to you.” He said. “I didn’t have to. I could have-”

“Could have what?” Ilya cut in. “Hidden it? Answered it yourself? Sent reply in secret? Is that better?”

“No.” Shane bit out, anger flaring. “That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“Do I?” Ilya’s laugh was short and humourless. “You are Hollandia’s prince. And my consort. Convenient position. Your father can say any poison he wants and then say, ‘Ah, but it is only my son speaking.’”

Shane stared at him, pulse thudding. “Is that what you think?” he asked, his voice coming out quieter than he intended. “That I’m here to poison you?”

“I think,” Ilya said, eyes narrowing, “That your father has not accepted that until you take your own crown, his son now belongs to Rozanova more than to him.”

“Belongs?” The word slammed into Shane’s chest. “I don’t belong to anyone.”

Another time, another version of this conversation, Ilya might have smiled at that. Might have teased, softened, touched. Now he only shook his head once, a jerky little motion.

“In his mind, you do,” He said. “And he uses you like piece on board. He sends my consort to deliver threats wrapped in silk and calls it strategy.”

Shane’s hands clenched at his sides. “I am not a piece. I am not a messenger. I’m trying to help you see what’s coming so you’re not blindsided.”

“Oh, how kind.” Ilya said, and the sarcasm was a slap. “You bring me blade and tell me where tip is.”

“Ilya-”

“What do you want me to say, Hollander?” He spread his arms, a parody of loose-limbed ease. “Thank you, my love, for bringing me the list of things your father wishes to take from my kingdom? For showing me how he thinks I am soft enough to agree because he gave me his son and called it peace?”

The words landed like stones.

Shane took a step toward him, anger and hurt knotted so tightly he could barely tell one from the other.

“I didn’t agree to marry you so I could act as my father’s mouthpiece.” He said through his teeth. “I agreed because it stopped bloodshed. Because it gave both our people a chance at something else. I agreed because I thought we-” He broke off, breath catching.

Because he’d thought they could build something. Because he’d thought Ilya saw him as more than a Hollander bargaining chip.

He swallowed it down.

“I’m doing everything I can to prove I’m here for Rozanova.” He said instead. “I learn your language. I sit in your court. I risk making mistakes in front of your nobles so they don’t think you married an idiot. I train in a yard where the ground actively tries to murder me. And the first time I bring you something difficult, you accuse me of... what? Betrayal?”

“Not first time.” Ilya said flatly. “Just first time with parchment.”

A sharp, bitter laugh escaped Shane. “Right. Of course. Everything about me is suspect. My birth, my accent, my father, my blood. I should’ve known better.”

“You should have known,” Ilya snapped, “that when my kingdom is hanging by thread, bringing me list of demands to weaken our borders is not ‘help.’”

Shane’s heart rattled in his chest. “I didn’t write the list.”

“But you brought it,” Ilya shot back. “You brought it, and you stand here asking me to understand your father. As if I do not understand men who smell weakness.”

His voice had risen. So had Shane’s. The air between them felt thin, crackling, charged like the moments before a storm breaks.

“I’m asking you to understand me.” Shane said. The words tore out of him. “That I am trying to stand between you and the worst of this. That I am trying to be more than a symbol in your bed and a pawn on his board. I brought you the letter because I trust you, not because I’m conspiring against you.”

For a second, something flickered in Ilya’s expression. Doubt. Regret. Then it was buried under fury and fear.

“Trust.” He repeated. “You speak of trust while handing me proof that the man who raised you still sees me as enemy.”

“He does,” Shane said. His voice shook. “He does, Ilya. He still sees you that way. Decades of war and bloodshed are not so easily forgotten. He is the generation that fought. We are not. That’s why this is hard. That’s why I’m here. I’m trying to be the bridge.”

“Maybe I do not want bridge that can be pulled away whenever Hollandia whistles.” Ilya snapped.

Shane reeled as if struck.

The words dug deep, slicing straight into the fear he hadn’t dared voice; that no matter what he did, where he slept, whose language he learned, he would always be something that could be taken back.

“That’s not fair and you know it.” He whispered.

“Fair?” Ilya’s laugh was ragged. “My father died with treaty still wet on table. Yours writes to demand my army stand down. And you come to me asking for fair.”

Shane’s breath stuttered. “So you’re punishing me for my father’s choices now? Is that what this is?”

“I am not punishing you.” Ilya said. “I am trying to defend what is left to me.”

“And I’m in the way,” Shane said, the words sour in his mouth. “Again.”

He felt something inside him crack.

“I left everything.” He said. “My home. My family. The life I knew. I crossed half a frozen continent to stand at your side in a court where everyone wanted me dead or gone. I did it because I believed this was worth it. That you were worth it. And the moment things get difficult you look at me like I’m the knife in your back.”

Ilya flinched at the personal attack. It showed in the tight line of his throat, the way his fingers spasmed on the edge of the table.

He didn't retreat.

"Forgive me." He said, voice abruptly low and rough, "If I do not know how to be soft when every letter from beyond these mountains reminds me how fragile this peace is."

"I'm not asking you to be soft," Shane said. "I'm asking you not to point your sword at me just because I'm the closest target."

Silence slammed down between them.

They stared at each other, breathing hard, the fire crackling in the corner like applause for a performance neither of them wanted to give.

Shane's chest hurt. His throat ached with unsaid words.

"Ilya," he said, quieter now, pleading threaded through the syllables. "I'm not your enemy."

For a heartbeat, he thought Ilya might step toward him. Might unclench his jaw, drop his shoulders, say something — anything — that would pull them back from this edge.

Instead, Ilya's mouth twisted, and he looked away.

"Maybe you should have thought of that," He said. "Before telling me how best to give ground."

The unfairness of it sparked white-hot in Shane's veins.

"I didn't tell you to give ground." He said. "I told you what my father wants. There's a difference. But if you've already decided I'm just Hollandia's leash on your throne, then what's the point?"

"What is the point indeed?" Ilya snapped. "You say you are bridge, but you stand on both sides and ask me to trust you will not jump whichever way wind blows."

"That is not what I'm doing," Shane said, voice fraying. "I'm not asking you to trust Hollandia. I'm asking you to trust me."

"How?" Ilya demanded, eyes suddenly wild. "Tell me, Hollander. How do I trust man whose father can recall him whenever he wishes? How do I trust that one day, when the next letter comes, you will not pack your things and walk back over the snow because Hollandia whistles and says, 'Come, boy, enough playing king's consort in the cold'?"

The words slammed into Shane's deepest fear, dead centre.

He hadn't even let himself think it that clearly. He'd pushed away the idea that his father could summon him home, that he could be ordered to abandon this, that his entire life here could be reduced to a phase, an experiment, a political manoeuvre to be reversed.

Hearing it in Ilya's voice — Ilya's fear — hurt in a way he hadn't been ready for.

His mouth opened. No sound came out.

"I left." He managed finally, hoarse. "I chose this. I chose peace. I chose you."

"For now." Ilya said.

It was too much.

The anger, the hurt, the exhaustion of weeks spent trying to fit a shape he didn't fully understand, it all surged up at once. The words that tumbled out next came from a place below reason, below training, below princely discipline.

"Maybe I shouldn't have come here at all then, if that's how you really feel." Shane said.

The second they were in the air, he wanted them back.

They hung between them, raw and ugly and honest in all the wrong ways.

Ilya went still.

His face didn't change much at first. A tiny flinch around the eyes. A split-second blankness, like a blow he hadn't expected had just landed in his ribs. He swallowed, throat working, gaze locked on Shane's.

Shane's heart hammered. Regret clawed up his spine.

"Ilya, I didn't mean—"

The softness in Ilya's eyes vanished, slammed behind something sharp and cold.

"Then go home, prince." He said. He spat the title like an insult.

Shane suddenly realised that Ilya hadn't used any of his pet names once in this entire conversation. No solnyshko. No milyy.

Prince.

The title cut through him like a dagger between his ribs.

For a moment, Shane genuinely forgot how to breathe. His vision narrowed, the edges of the room blurring. The word echoed in his skull, louder than the crackle of the fire, louder than his own pulse.

Prince. Not husband. Not consort. Not partner.

The boy from the enemy court. The walking treaty. The piece on the board.

"Understood." He heard himself say.

His voice was steady. He had no idea how.

He bowed. The precise, perfect depth demanded by Rozanovan etiquette for a subject addressing their king. It wasn't respect. It was armour. Training taking over where feeling had just been gutted.

Then he turned and walked out.

He did not look back.

The corridor outside felt colder than the yard.

Shane walked with measured steps, every inch the prince he'd been raised to be. His spine was straight. His shoulders did not sag. His chin did not drop.

He made it around the first corner before the world tilted.

His hand shot out, bracing against the rough stone of the wall. The chill seeped through his palm, up his arm, into his chest.

He sucked in a breath that scraped his throat.

"Shit." He whispered, uselessly.

A pair of servants hurried past at the far end of the corridor, their eyes carefully averted. He watched their backs until they vanished, then pushed off the wall and forced his legs to carry him to their chambers.

If he met anyone on the way, he didn't remember.

The door shut behind him with a dull thud.

For a heartbeat, he just stood there, staring at the bed, the fire, the chair where Ilya's cloak so often ended up. The room that had begun to feel like something almost close to his.

His knees folded.

He sank down beside the bed, fingers clutching at the heavy blanket, knuckles white. The breath he'd been holding collapsed into a shudder he couldn't bite back.

He pressed his forehead against the mattress, eyes squeezing shut.

"Then go home, prince."

The words repeated, over and over, in the echo of Ilya's voice. Not shouted. Not snarled. Just... cold. Final.

He'd had men insult him before. Opposing sparring partners calling him names to test him. Political enemies dismissing him as soft, as pretty, as untested. None of that had cut like this

single, quiet sentence from the man whose warmth he'd been sleeping beside and that he'd come to appreciate more with every passing moment.

He realised belatedly that his hands were shaking.

Weeks of tension and effort and quiet fear unfurled inside him, all at once. Every pointed look in the hall, every whispered enemy, every time he'd stumbled over a Rozanovan consonant and seen polite confusion on a servant's face, every morning he'd woken alone and told himself Ilya was busy, not avoiding him. It all crashed together with the memory of his father's words on paper, ink still wet.

Remember where your loyalties lie, my son.

He let out a breath that sounded far too close to a sob and bit down on the inside of his cheek until the sharp sting anchored him.

"I am loyal." He muttered into the blanket. "I am. I came here. I stayed."

His voice cracked.

"Isn't that enough?"

Silence. The fire popped. Wind moaned faintly in some distant passage.

He pulled himself up, not quite trusting his legs, and crawled onto the bed instead, collapsing on top of the covers. He didn't bother taking off his boots. He couldn't seem to make his hands work properly.

Staring at the canopy overhead, he felt the first hot tear slip sideways into his hair.

He let it.

There was no one here to see.

For a long time, he just lay there, listening to the ragged push and pull of his own breath, the too-loud pounding of his heart. His chest hurt, a deep, bruised ache, like something had been scraped out and not quite put back.

Eventually, the tears burned themselves out. His eyes felt raw. His head ached dully. Exhaustion crept in on heavy feet, dragging at his limbs.

He rolled onto his side, toward Ilya's empty half of the bed.

The sheets there were cold. He reached out anyway, fingers brushing over the indentation where a larger body had lain so many nights now, warmth seeping into his bones.

"Please don't mean it." He whispered into the quiet.

His voice barely carried beyond the pillow.

He waited, absurdly, for a reply. A joke thrown from the doorway. A familiar weight on the mattress. A rough, accented voice telling him not to be stupid, of course he didn't mean it, come here, solnyshko.

Nothing came.

The fire crackled and shifted. Somewhere deep in the castle, a door banged shut in a gust of wind.

Shane curled in on himself, drawing his knees up, pulling the blanket half-heartedly over his shoulder with numbed fingers. His boots hung off the edge of the bed. He was too tired to care.

He listened to the silence for a long time.

He didn't know when he fell asleep.

He only knew that when he finally woke again, the other side of the bed was still empty, and the room was colder than it had been in weeks.

The days after the fight stretched long and brittle.

Shane had never been more aware of the sound of silence.

It followed him through the corridors, padded at his heels like a pale, loyal hound, sat with him at the end of long tables and curled up in the cold hollow on Ilya's side of the bed. It clung to the air in the solar when he entered and found Ilya already there with his council, expression blank and professional, addressing him as "Highness" and "the consort" and never, ever by name.

They didn't scream at each other again.

They didn't say much of anything.

The court noticed. Of course they did. Nobles who had once bowed stiffly and then loosened over weeks went rigid again. Servants stopped offering him scraps of gossip. Guards, who had started to nod and grin at his efforts in the training yard, drew their faces shut when he walked past.

The Rozanovan words he'd fought to learn turned on him, now that he could hear them.

"...posle pisma..." after the letter...

"...ne govor'yut..." they do not speak...

"...Hollander..." always that word, landing like a weight.

He heard worse sometimes, when they thought he was too far away to understand.

“King’s mistake.”

“Too soft.”

“Will run home once winter deepens.”

He stood taller when he walked past them. Years of court training kicked in, smoothing his face into something calm and distant. If he had learnt anything from growing up with a crown over his head, it was how to bleed in private.

At night, though, it was harder.

They moved around each other like ghosts after that. When Shane entered a room, Ilya was already occupied with advisers, or talking to generals, or leaving. When Ilya arrived somewhere, Shane found a reason to be done, nodding politely, stepping aside.

In court, they were impeccable. A king and a consort presenting a unified front. Ilya would ask for his opinion sometimes on some minor matter, and Shane would give it, voice flat, careful. Ilya would nod. Their eyes would not meet for longer than necessary.

Shane told himself he preferred that to another fight.

He didn’t quite believe himself.

On the fourth evening, after a day that felt like dragging himself uphill through snow with no end, he was half-asleep by the fire in their chambers when a knock came at the door.

Not Ilya, he would’ve just barged in. This was too careful. Too formal.

He sat up, pulling the blanket off his legs. “Yes?”

The door opened and one of the castle stewards stepped in. An older man with careful posture, the kind of invisible efficiency that kept a place like this running.

“Highness,” He said, bowing. “His Majesty requests your presence.”

Shane’s heart jolted, then thudded hard.

“Now?” He asked, hating the way the word came out thinner than he wanted.

“Immediately.” The steward confirmed. “Alone.”

Alone.

No council. No witnesses.

The last time they had been alone together for more than a few minutes, Shane had told Ilya he shouldn’t have come, and Ilya had called him prince and told him to go home.

“Very well.” Shane said. His voice sounded almost normal. “Lead the way.”

He stood, tugged his boots properly on, and followed the steward out into the corridor.

The castle at night was a different creature than during the day. The torches burned lower, shadows stretching long along the walls. Servants moved quickly and quietly, faces half-lit, footsteps soft. Somewhere distant, a door slammed in a puff of cold air. The stones underfoot held the chill like they meant it.

They didn't take the route Shane expected.

Not toward the solar, or the council chamber, or the great hall. The steward led him down a narrower corridor lined with bare stone, past places Shane had only glimpsed in passing. The air grew colder as they went, the ceiling lower. His breath whitened in front of him.

"Where are we going?" Shane asked, after they took a turn he was sure led away from every part of the castle he knew.

"To the shrine." The steward said.

Shane's steps faltered slightly.

"The Shrine of Kings." The man clarified, as if that would help.

It didn't.

Shane had heard of it, of course. Rozanovan kings were buried beneath the mountain, their memory housed in stone and iron and stories. It was a place for prayers and oaths and grief. Not, in his experience, great places for being told you were a terrible mistake and needed to pack up and leave.

His pulse picked up, fast and arrhythmic.

"He is... there now?" He asked.

"Yes, Highness." The steward said. "He asked that you join him there."

Shane considered, briefly, refusing. Another version of himself — younger, pettier, less weighed down — would have. He could have said he was tired. Or unwell. Or busy. He could have sent a note asking if the king required his presence in the morning instead.

But he had spent days drowning in unspoken words. An extra night would not save him.

"Thank you." He said instead.

The steward nodded and led him down one last flight of steps.

They stopped before a door unlike any Shane had seen in the castle so far. It was stone, yes, but softer somehow in its carving, worn smooth in places by hands and time. Figures had been etched into its surface; kings with crowns of winter, wolves and bears and storms curling around their feet, a sun rising over a jagged horizon. Old words in Rozanovan wound around the border.

Shane could pick out a handful now: king, winter, blood, oath.

He wanted very badly not to be sick.

The steward pushed the door open with a respectful incline of his head and stepped aside.

“His Majesty is within.” He said. “He asked that you go in alone.”

Shane swallowed.

“All right.” He said.

The door swung closed behind him with a deep, muffled thud as he stepped through.

The shrine was cold, even by Rozanovan standards.

Cold that felt older than the castle, than the treaty, than the war. It seeped up from the very bones of the mountain, a steady, unrelenting presence that lay under the flicker of firelight like a second shadow.

The chamber was vast, supported by pillars carved in the likeness of ancient kings. Their stone faces watched from every side; some stern, some sorrowful, some entirely inscrutable. Iron braziers burned low along the walls, their flames guttering in occasional drafts. The air smelled of smoke and iron and the faint, bitter tang of incense.

Ilya stood in the middle of it, with his back to the door.

Shane recognised the statue in front of him from the stories he’d heard; the most recent addition to the line, a man with Ilya’s jaw and eyes, carved with a sword resting point-down beneath his hands. The face bore no crown, only a circlet; the armour was simple compared to some of the more elaborate figures.

King Grigori Rozanov. Ilya’s father. The man who had signed the treaty.

The man who had died three days later.

Shane closed his hand around the edge of his cloak and forced his legs to carry him forward.

He didn’t speak immediately. Something about the space made silence feel less like avoidance and more like respect. His boots rang softly on the stone, the sound swallowed quickly. He stopped when there was still a careful distance between them, not wanting to crowd, not wanting to intrude.

“Ilya.” He said quietly.

Ilya didn’t turn right away.

He stood with his hands resting on the stone in front of the statue, fingers spread. His curls hung unbound around his face, darker in the low light. He wore simple black trousers and a loose shirt, no embroidery, no fur, no circlet, no cuff. Stripped of all the trappings of the

throne, he somehow looked more like a king than ever, and, at the same time, too young for the weight.

When he finally spoke, his voice echoed faintly off the surrounding stone.

“I did not think you would come.” He said.

Shane flinched at the sound of it. Not because it was angry. Because it wasn’t.

“I thought about not coming,” Shane admitted. The words felt too loud and too small at once. “But you asked for me.”

“I did.” Ilya said.

He was quiet for a moment longer, the tension in his shoulders visible even from behind.

“Thank you for answering.” he added.

Shane hadn’t realised how tightly he’d been holding himself until something loosened in his chest.

He took a few more steps forward, coming to stand beside Ilya, not directly in front of him. Up close, the statue loomed even larger, the stone weight of the dead king pressing down.

The carved eyes stared past them both.

“This is him?” Shane asked softly. “Your father.”

Ilya’s fingers flexed against the stone. “Da. This is him.”

They stood there in a shared silence. Shane could feel the cold of the stone pushing against the heat that radiated, as always, from Ilya’s body, even standing still.

After a while, Ilya spoke again, same low voice.

“He used to bring me here when I was boy.” He said. “Not this shrine. The old one, in summer palace. Statues were smaller. Less dramatic.” A shadow of a smile tugged at his mouth. “He would point to each king and tell me stories. How they won battles, lost battles. Who froze in winter because they were stupid. Who listened.”

Shane glanced at him sidelong. Ilya’s gaze stayed fixed on his father’s face.

“He would say, ‘You will stand with them one day.’” Ilya went on. “I thought he meant when I was old. White beard. Good life behind me.”

He huffed a breath that might have been a laugh, if it didn’t sound so broken.

“I did not think it would be now.”

Shane swallowed, his own throat tight.

“I’m sorry.” He said quietly. The words felt inadequate, but he meant them down to his bones.

“I know.” Ilya said. “Many men have told me they are sorry. Priests. Generals. Ambassadors who liked my father more than me.” His fingers tightened on the edge of the stone slab. “It does not change that he is stone now.”

Shane’s gaze drifted up to the carved features.

The sculptor had been kind. Or accurate. Or both. There was warmth in the set of the mouth, humour at the corners of the eyes, a weight that looked earned rather than simply worn.

“You look like him.” Shane said.

It slipped out before he could decide whether it was wise.

Ilya’s jaw moved. “Everyone says this.” He muttered.

“It’s true.” Shane insisted. “In the eyes. And the way your mouth looks like it’s always one second away from saying something that will annoy someone.”

That dragged a weaker, more honest huff out of him.

“Yes,” Ilya said. “He was very good at that.”

They fell silent again.

Shane let his fingers drift, just once, to touch the carved stone at the base of the statue. It was cold and smooth, the edges softened by time.

“Ilya,” He said after a while. “Why did you bring me here?”

“Because I am tired.” Ilya said simply.

Shane blinked. “Tired of...?”

“Everything.” Ilya exhaled. “Of winter. Of letters. Of men who smile while sharpening knives behind their backs. Of feeling like I am one step away from losing everything every day I open my eyes.” His voice roughened. “Of fighting with you when I never meant to.”

The last part came out like something torn.

Shane stared at him, breath caught.

“I do not want to fight with you, Hollander.” Ilya said, and the name landed differently this time. Not a weapon. A habit. A shield he didn’t quite know how to lower.

It still hurt. Less like a stab, more like pressure on a bruise.

“You did a good job of it.” Shane said, before he could smooth the edges off his tone.

Ilya winced.

“I know.” He said. “I am... not proud.”

Shane turned more fully toward him. “Then why?” He asked, trying to keep his voice steady. “Why say those things to me?”

Ilya finally looked at him.

Shane had seen Ilya in many moods; arrogant, amused, furious, amused and furious in a way that made generals nervous. He had seen him confident, bored, sharp enough to cut through council chatter with a few well-placed words.

He had never seen him quite like this.

His eyes were red-rimmed, like he'd been staring at something for too long without blinking. His face looked oddly open without the usual smirk or scowl to occupy it. There was something raw there, stripped and unarmoured.

“Because I am coward.” Ilya said.

Shane stared. “You're the least cowardly person I've ever met.”

“No.” Ilya said, and actually gave a faint, bitter smile. “I am very brave on battlefield. Very brave in court. Very brave with sword. Here-” He tapped his chest with two fingers. “Here I am coward. Here, when something scares me, I bite it so it does not bite me first.”

He shook his head.

“You scared me.” He said. “That letter scared me. The way it spoke. The way your father pulled at you from far away. It felt like I could feel his hand on your shoulder, tugging.”

Shane's throat tightened.

“I am not a dog.” He said quietly.

“I know,” Ilya said quickly. “I know. But you have some angry teeth of your own.” He dragged a hand over his face. “But that fear... that one day he will call you back, and you will go because he is your father, your king. It crawled into my heart and made my brain stupid.”

He met Shane's gaze, and there was no wryness there now, nothing to hide behind.

“When you said you should not have come,” Ilya went on. “My heart heard you say you wanted to leave. That all this was mistake. That I was mistake.”

“I didn't-” Shane began.

“I know,” Ilya said again, cutting himself off rather than Shane. “I know you did not mean it that way. But I heard it that way.” He bit the inside of his cheek. “And I panicked.”

“So you panicked by telling me to go home.” Shane said, the words half-bitter, half disbelief.

“Da.” Ilya said.

Shane let out a sound that might have been a laugh if it hadn’t broken on its way out. “That’s a terrible strategy.”

“I am aware.” Ilya said dryly. “In my defence, kings do not normally have to learn how to not be idiots about people they care about.”

Shane’s heart stumbled over that word. He forced himself to breathe past it.

“You hurt me.” He said.

He hadn’t meant to say it flat like that, without cushioning, but it came out true and heavy and hanging.

Ilya flinched as if struck. “I know.” He said again, and his voice finally frayed at the edges. “I heard it in the way you walked out. I heard it in the way you have not looked at me for four days.”

“I looked at you.” Shane said quickly, as if stung.

“Not like before.” Ilya replied, and the quiet in it was worse than any shouting. “Before, you looked at me like I was... choice. Something you had picked and were still deciding to pick, again every day. After, you looked like you were waiting for impact.”

Shane swallowed hard.

“I didn’t want to show you.” He admitted. “How much it hurt. I thought... you already knew you had that power. I didn’t want to give you more.”

Ilya’s shoulders dropped.

“I knew.” he said softly. “That I could hurt you. I did not know I would be stupid enough to do it.”

The confession sat between them, heavy as the stone statues.

Shane looked back up at King Grigori’s carved face. “You said you can’t lose more.” He said. “Is that what this is?”

Ilya was quiet for so long Shane thought he wouldn’t answer.

Then, very quietly: “I am so afraid.”

The words hit harder than anger.

“Of what?” Shane asked.

Ilya gestured, a little helplessly, at the statue. At the rows of stone kings. At the invisible weight of the mountain on their heads.

“Of all of it.” He said. “Of failing this.” His hand curled into a fist. “Of failing him. Of failing you. Of failing my people. Of waking up one day and finding that I have given too much away; land, gold, soldiers, pieces of myself, and I have nothing left to hold when everything comes to break us.”

He kept his gaze on the stone, not on Shane.

“When your father writes asking me to move my army, I hear his voice and his father’s and his father’s father saying, ‘Rozanova will bow. Rozanova will bend.’ When I look at you, I see Hollandia’s colours in your eyes. And I think, ‘How long until they ask for him back, too?’”

Shane’s eyes burned. “I’m not-”

“I know,” Ilya said, once again. “I know you are not them. But fear is not clever. It grabs nearest thing.” He lifted a hand and touched his own chest again, fingers curling. “You are close. Important. So my fear grabbed you. It said, ‘Push him away first. Hurt him first. Then it will not hurt so much when he leaves you.’”

Shane had to take a step back, just to breathe.

“That’s not how it works.” He said quietly.

“I am learning, just like you are. Different kind.” Ilya replied, with a ragged little half-smile.

They looked at each other for a long moment.

“I’m not leaving.” Shane said at last, the words slow and deliberate. “I don’t... know what will happen in ten years, or twenty. If war comes, if treaties change, if we-” He broke off, shook his head. “But I know this: I didn’t cross half a continent and marry you just to run back at the first sign of pressure. I chose this. I chose you, Ilya. I’m tired of everyone treating me like I’m a piece that can be moved instead of someone who moves himself.”

He took a breath.

“You hurt me,” He repeated. “But I’m still here.”

Ilya’s throat moved. He made a small sound that might have been another word, but it fell apart before it left his mouth.

Shane stepped forward again.

This time, when he reached out, he didn’t aim for stone. He set his hand, hesitantly, on Ilya’s wrist. The skin was warm under his palm, the pulse strong and fast. This close, he could see individual flecks of green and gold in Ilya’s eyes, the faint smudges of tiredness under them.

Ilya went very still.

“I’m not your father’s treaty,” Shane said. “And I’m not my father’s leash. I am your husband. You don’t get to throw me away when you’re scared.”

A breath escaped Ilya, shaky, like air out of a cracked vessel.

His gaze dropped briefly to Shane’s hand, then climbed back up.

“You are right.” he said.

The simplicity of it, after all the twisting, all the deflection, nearly unsteadied Shane more than anything.

“I am sorry.” Ilya added, and the words came out rough, as if he wasn’t entirely used to saying them. “Not just as king. As man. As...” He faltered, searching. “As your husband. I am sorry I yelled at you. I am sorry I told you to go when what I meant was ‘please stay.’”

Shane’s eyes prickled.

“Then say that.” He said, his voice barely above a whisper. “Say ‘please stay.’”

For a moment, Ilya’s mouth pressed thin, as if pride and vulnerability were at war behind them. Then something in his gaze eased, and he let it go.

“Stay.” He said, softly. “Please, Shane.”

The plea landed in the hollow place that had opened up in Shane days ago and settled there, solid and warm.

“Okay.” Shane whispered without hesitation. His fingers tightened slightly on Ilya’s wrist. “I will.”

They stood like that for a heartbeat.

Then Ilya closed the distance the rest of the way.

He lifted his free hand and cupped Shane’s jaw, fingers calloused and careful against his skin. The touch sent a quiet shiver down Shane’s spine, not the sharp jolt of lust so much as the deep, aching relief of finally being allowed to lean.

Shane didn’t pull away.

Ilya’s forehead dropped to rest against his, breath mingling in the cold air between them. Up close, he smelled like smoke and winter air and something uniquely his own, something that had seeped into Shane’s awareness over the past weeks until it had become as familiar as his own skin.

“I am sorry.” Ilya murmured again, so close the words hummed against Shane’s mouth.

“I am too.” Shane said. “I shouldn’t have said I shouldn’t have come. I didn’t mean that. Not really.”

“I know.” Ilya said. “But it still cut. Like my words cut you.”

“Then we’re even, now.” Shane tried, and the attempt at humour came out shaky.

“No,” Ilya said. “I do not want to be even.” His thumb brushed Shane’s cheekbone, slow and reverent. “I want to be better.”

Shane’s breath hitched.

He hadn’t realised how desperate he was to hear that; not just apology, but a promise, however fragile, that they would try to do this differently next time.

“We’re both going to keep messing up.” He said, because he had to be honest, here of all places. “We’re both... who we are. And this is a lot.”

“Yes,” Ilya agreed. “But next time we mess up, we talk more.” His gaze was steady. “We do not run. We do not throw each other away because we are afraid. Da?”

The question sat between them like an offered sword.

Shane swallowed and nodded.

“Da.” he said.

The simple agreement in Ilya’s own tongue softened something in the other man’s expression. Pride, yes, but also something quieter. Something like gratitude.

“You are very brave.” Ilya said. “To stay.”

“So are you.” Shane replied. “To ask.”

He felt more than saw the smile curve Ilya’s lips.

“Sometimes,” Ilya said, “I think you are braver than you know.”

That did something unhelpful to Shane’s chest.

There was a moment then — a small, quiet, dangerous moment — where the proximity between them changed shade. Shane could feel it in the way Ilya’s thumb lingered near the corner of his mouth, in the way their breath stuttered in the same rhythm. The shrine was still full of carved kings and cold air and incense, but the space between their bodies narrowed to something that could, with very little encouragement, become a kiss.

Shane’s heart thudded, heavy and hot.

Ilya’s gaze dropped to his lips for a fraction of a second.

Then, deliberately, he shifted his hand, brushing his thumb along Shane’s cheek instead of closer.

“Beautiful.” He said quietly.

Not as a thrown compliment. Not as a joke. As if the word surprised him even as he said it. As if he were only now realising he'd been thinking it for a long time.

Shane flushed, the heat blooming under Ilya's hand.

"I'm a mess." He said, because deflection was easier than acceptance. "My eyes are red. My nose is probably-"

"Beautiful." Ilya repeated, a little more firmly. "Even when you fight with me. Especially when you stand up and tell me I am wrong. Although is more sexy than beautiful."

Shane's mouth quirked helplessly. "You are going to regret encouraging that."

"Already regret many things," Ilya murmured. "Not that."

They stood like that, foreheads touching, breathing the same cold, incense-laced air for a long time. Long enough for the frantic edge of Shane's heartbeat to ease into something steadier. Long enough to feel, for the first time since the fight, like the ground beneath his feet might hold.

At last, Ilya drew back a little, though he didn't drop his hand entirely.

"Come." He spoke. "If we stay here much longer, my ancestors will start offering advice. They were very nosy in life. In death, worse."

Shane let out a startled laugh that came more easily than he expected.

"That seems to be a theme." He said. "Nosy dead men. Nosy generals. Nosy fathers."

"Nosy princes." Ilya added.

Shane arched a brow. "Oh, I'm the nosy one?"

"Yes." Ilya said gravely. "You insisted on knowing what was in letter. Very nosy."

"You insisted on reading it." Shane pointed out.

"Details." Ilya said, waving a hand.

He reached down without making a show of it and laced their fingers together.

Shane looked at their joined hands; the contrast between his own narrower fingers and Ilya's broader ones, the curve of knuckles, the iron strength in the grip that somehow didn't threaten to crush. His chest went a little tight again, but in a good way.

He squeezed, just once.

Ilya squeezed back.

They walked out of the shrine side by side.

The corridor beyond felt less like a tunnel and more like a passage now, the torches throwing overlapping pools of warm light on the stone. The castle still smelled of cold and stone and smoke, but some of the weight had shifted.

Shane knew they weren't done. There would be more letters, more political pressure, more moments where fear made both of them stupid. But there was a promise now, laid down between them like a foundation.

Next time, we speak.

Next time, we stay.

As the door to the shrine closed quietly behind them, Shane glanced at Ilya, at their joined hands, at the faint curve of the king's mouth as he looked ahead.

He felt the words rise before he could squash them.

"Ilya?" he said.

"Hm?" Ilya glanced over.

"I'm glad I came." Shane said.

Ilya's grip tightened minutely.

"So am I." he replied softly. "More than you know, solnyshko."

The term of endearment set off a flutter inside Shane's heart that lasted for hours. When they went to bed that night, Shane closed the distance between them. He fell asleep in Ilya's arms and remained there through the night.

Warm. Safe. Falling into something deeper.

Shane woke to the feeling of being held.

For a dazed, drifting moment, he thought it was a dream. The kind where things he wanted and things he feared blurred together too smoothly to tell apart, waking up with his heart pounding and his throat tight.

But the weight at his waist was real. The heat along his spine was real. The steady, unhurried breath against the back of his neck was real.

He lay very still and let his mind catch up.

Their bed. The faint grey of early morning pressed against the high, slitted window. The soft crackle of a low fire, banked down to embers. The ache in his muscles from too many days of tension, eased now into something looser.

And behind him, one arm hooked over his middle, palm spread warm over his stomach, a solid chest pressed to his back.

Ilya.

The realisation didn't bring the lurch of panic it might have, even a week ago. The last time he'd woken tangled up with Ilya, he'd flushed scarlet, mind splintering between this is too much and this is nice and *if he notices you're hard you might die on the spot*.

He'd been all nerves and instinct, clumsy with a body that wouldn't behave and a heart that didn't yet trust the ground it stood on.

Now... it was different.

Not that his heart had calmed down any. It still thudded too fast, too full, as he slowly became aware of just how much of Ilya there was pressed along his back. The warmth. The quiet strength. The sheer size of him, curled around Shane like a living rampart.

But the fear that usually sat coiled under his ribs had loosened. The sharp thought of 'I shouldn't be here' had gone quiet. He'd stood in a shrine with Ilya's hand on his jaw and heard him say 'stay'. He'd heard the words please and forgive me in the same breath and felt something inside him unclench.

For the first time since he'd ridden through Rozanova's gates, he believed he had a right to be here.

He didn't want to disturb that by moving too quickly.

Careful, inch by inch, he shifted so he could see him.

Ilya was on his back now, head tipped slightly towards Shane, curls in absolute mutiny. They spilled over the pillow, across his forehead, one strand stubbornly caught against his lashes. Without the circlet or the carefully contained expression he wore in court, he looked almost boyish. Young. Vulnerable in a way Shane doubted anyone else ever saw.

His mouth, usually shaped around terrible jokes or blunt commands, had gone lax and soft. The faint lines at the corners of his eyes had smoothed. No armour. No sharpness. Just... Ilya.

Shane swallowed against the tightness in his chest.

He let his gaze drift, cataloguing details in a way he'd never quite allowed himself before. The shadow of stubble along Ilya's jaw. The small scar near his left brow. The way his throat moved as he breathed. The way his hand, the one that wasn't holding Shane, lay palm-up on the sheets, fingers loose, as if even asleep he was ready to take hold of something.

Someone.

Shane's eyes dropped, unhelpfully, to Ilya's mouth.

At their wedding, that mouth had touched his in front of an entire hall full of witnesses. The kiss had been quick, almost chaste, nothing more than a press of lips to seal a vow and satisfy ritual. He'd barely processed it at the time. There had been too many eyes, too much noise, too much weight on his shoulders to pay attention to the particulars of another man's mouth.

Now, with only cold stone and half-dead braziers for company, he thought about it properly.

About how it had felt.

About how it might feel again.

If it were just them.

If it were slower.

If Ilya held him like this and kissed him like that was the only thing he meant to do all day.

Heat flared low in his stomach.

He didn't move. Didn't lean in. He wasn't an idiot. But the wanting sat there, bright and alarming and oddly steady. Not a wild rush or a reckless urge, just a quiet, stubborn need.

I want to kiss him. Properly. Not for them. For me.

He took a careful breath and reached out before he could lose his nerve, fingers brushing that stray curl from Ilya's forehead.

Ilya stirred.

Shane froze, hand hovering in mid-air.

Ilya made a low sound, somewhere between a hum and a grumble, brow crinkling. His lashes fluttered. Then his eyes opened, hazy and unfocused at first, pupils slow to adjust to the thin light.

He blinked once. Twice.

"Mm." He said intelligently.

Shane managed a small, strangled, "Hi."

Recognition landed. So did something softer, loosening the corners of Ilya's mouth.

"Dobroye utro, solnyshko." He murmured, voice rough with sleep, accent thick and curling.

The term of endearment wrapped around Shane like the blankets. He felt himself flush, heat creeping up from his neck and down into the pit of his stomach.

"Morning." He said, and was absurdly pleased that his voice didn't crack.

Ilya shifted closer, like it was the most natural thing in the world, the arm around Shane's waist tightening fractionally. He tucked his face into the curve of Shane's shoulder for a second, breath warm against bare skin.

“You are staring.” He said after a moment, words muffled.

“You were asleep.” Shane protested, heart doing a ridiculous little jump at the sensation.

“You think I do not feel when someone is burning holes in my face with their eyes?” Ilya tipped his head back just enough to peer up at him, lips twitching. “Very intense for so early.”

“I wasn’t intense.” Shane muttered. “You were just... there.”

Ilya’s brow rose. “Da? And when I am ‘just there’ you stare like I am sunrise.”

Shane’s face went hot. “That’s- I don’t-”

Ilya’s smile sharpened briefly, then softened before it could become a smirk. He reached up, almost absently, and brushed his knuckles along Shane’s cheek.

“You have colour again.” He said. “I like it.”

Shane swallowed. “I slept better.” He admitted.

“Good.” Ilya said simply. His fingers lingered, warm against Shane’s jaw, his other arm pulling him almost imperceptibly closer. “I woke three times thinking you had gone.”

The words landed so quietly Shane almost missed them under the usual teasing.

“You thought I’d just... leave in the middle of the night?” He asked, trying for lightness and failing.

“Old habits.” Ilya said with a small shrug, withdrawing his hand but not his gaze. “People leave. I grew used to checking.”

Shane’s throat tightened. “I told you I’d stay.”

“I know.” Ilya said. The way he said it made it clear he was trying, with all the stubbornness most men reserved for war and politics, to believe it. “My head knows. The rest of me takes... convincing.”

Shane let out a slow breath. “Then I’ll keep convincing it.”

For once, Ilya didn’t reach for a joke.

Instead, he looked at Shane like he was seeing him for the first time all over again, eyes tracing his face from hairline to mouth with an intensity that made Shane’s skin feel suddenly too tight.

“You are very dangerous when you say things like that.” He said quietly.

Shane’s mouth went dry. “Dangerous?”

“Yes.” Ilya’s voice dropped. “Makes me think you mean them.”

“I do.” Shane said.

The corner of Ilya’s mouth tugged up, slow and almost shy. “Then I am in trouble.” He murmured.

They hovered there, balanced on some fine, unseen line. Shane could feel the tension in it, not sharp like before, not the brittle crackle of impending argument, but something warmer. Anticipation. Possibility.

He became aware again of how close they were. Of Ilya’s breath on his skin. Of how easy it would be to close the last bit of distance between their mouths, to see if that wedding kiss had been a fluke or a promise.

His heart thudded hard enough that he was half-convinced Ilya could feel it.

Ilya’s gaze flickered briefly to his lips.

Shane swallowed, heart thudding painfully, and forced himself to breathe.

“Ilya?” He whispered.

“Mmm?” Came the soft reply.

Shane’s voice trembled despite his efforts. “Would it... be okay if I kissed you?”

Ilya went very still. Completely awake in an instant.

For a second, Shane thought he’d ruined everything. He opened his mouth to backtrack-

“I mean only if you want to, I just- I wasn’t trying to assume, I-”

Ilya’s hand came up gently, fingers brushing Shane’s jaw, stopping the words in his throat.

“Solnyshko,” Ilya murmured, voice low and warm, “I have wanted you to ask since wedding.”

Shane’s breath caught.

Ilya’s thumb traced the curve of his cheek, slow and deliberate, guiding Shane’s face closer.

“Come here.” He whispered.

Shane leaned in; cautious, shy, nervous in a way that made his chest feel too tight. Their foreheads touched first, a soft, steady pressure. Shane could feel Ilya’s breath against his lips. Warm. Close. Waiting.

Then, with a quiet exhale, Ilya tilted his head and closed the distance.

Their mouths met.

It wasn't deep.
It wasn't desperate.

It was soft, so soft it made Shane's heart squeeze. A gentle press of lips warm from sleep, a moment that felt more like a promise than a kiss. Ilya's hand slid to cradle the side of Shane's neck, thumb stroking once in a slow arc.

Shane let out a tiny sound he couldn't swallow back, something between a sigh and a gasp.

Ilya's lips curved against his.

They lingered only a breath, another, before Shane felt Ilya's lips part just slightly, inviting but not pushing, giving him room to move if he wanted.

Shane followed instinct before thought: he kissed him back, just once, a tender, testing press.

Ilya inhaled sharply.
Like Shane had shocked him.
Like it mattered.

They pulled back by the smallest distance, noses brushing, breaths mingling in a fragile, glowing hush.

Ilya looked at him — really looked — eyes warm and dark and lit with something Shane didn't dare name yet.

“Beautiful.” He whispered once again.

Shane didn't get the chance to respond.

A hard knock shattered the moment.

“Your Majesties!” Came a strained voice through the door. “An urgent matter, you are needed at once.”

The spell broke, but not the warmth.

Ilya closed his eyes briefly, forehead touching Shane's for one last, grounding second.

“Of all times...” he muttered under his breath, accent thickening with irritation.

Shane let out a breathless, nervous laugh.

Ilya opened his eyes again, softer now, and brushed his thumb along Shane's cheek one last time before reluctantly pulling back.

“This,” He said quietly, voice warm and sure, “We will continue later, da?”

Shane's pulse fluttered.

“Da.” He whispered.

As they rose from the bed, neither of them said it aloud, but both understood:

The kiss had changed something.
Opened something.
Started something.

And neither wanted it to stop now.

The days after their first real kiss blurred in a way that made it hard for Shane to remember where exactly one ended and the next began.

Nothing earth-shattering happened.

There were no grand declarations, no dramatic scenes, no shifting of crowns or laws. The castle remained what it had always been: cold and vast and humming with the wary energy of people who had seen too many winters and trusted very little.

But for him, everything felt slightly, quietly different.

It was in the small things. The way his gaze kept catching on Ilya's mouth when they sat near each other, the way his body leaned, almost of its own accord, towards where Ilya was in a room, as if some inner compass had recalibrated itself.

They did not talk about the kiss.

They did not need to.

The morning after, Shane had reached for a cup in their chamber and Ilya had stepped around him to reach for something on the shelf, crowding his space just enough that their shoulders brushed. When Shane turned his head, startled, their faces had been close. Close enough for the question to rise up between them without words again.

This time, Ilya asked it.

His hand slid lightly along the back of Shane's neck, fingers warm at the hairline, and he paused. Waiting. Giving Shane the chance to pull away.

Shane did not.

They kissed again.

Shorter. Almost chaste. Barely more pressure than the first time, but with a new awareness behind it, a deliberate choosing. It was sweet and a little awkward and made Shane feel like his skin was too tight.

After that, the kisses kept happening.

Not constantly. Never where anyone might see. They were careful in a way that made Shane think Ilya was as protective of this as he was of the treaty itself.

In a shadowed alcove behind a heavy tapestry where the stone cut the wind, Ilya would lean in, murmur something half nonsensical about how Shane's nose was turning red again, and steal a quick brush of lips that did nothing to warm his nose and everything to light up his chest.

In the private corner of the solar, late at night, when a long day of council finally ended and Shane handed Ilya a cup of wine, their fingers would catch, and before Shane could move, Ilya's hand would curl around his wrist and tug him closer. A kiss, unhurried but still careful, with the taste of wine on Ilya's mouth and exhaustion in his shoulders.

Once, in the corridor outside their chambers, when a servant had just left and no one else lingered, Shane had reached to help with Ilya's gloves. Ilya had made some complaint about princes making good valets, and when Shane looked up to retort, Ilya had tilted his head and kissed him right there in the open space.

Only for a heartbeat.

Only soft.

But it had almost buckled Shane's knees.

He thought about it more than he would ever admit. In language lessons, his mind wandered from verb cases to the shape of Ilya's mouth. In the training yard, he would catch himself remembering the way Ilya's thumb had brushed the corner of his lips afterward, like he was checking to see if he had left a mark.

Shane tried not to get ahead of himself. He reminded himself that kisses were not promises. That they were still learning about each other. That politics and cold and grief hung between them like a curtain.

It did not change the quiet truth settling in his chest.

He was falling.

Not all at once. Not in some dramatic plunge. It felt instead like snow piling on a roof, almost imperceptible until suddenly it was heavy enough to change the shape of the house beneath it.

He wanted more.

More kisses. More mornings waking with Ilya's arm around him. More of that look in Ilya's eyes when they were alone, the one that said he was not just a consort or a prince or a treaty.

Shane wanted, very simply, more time together.

He had no idea of how fate sometimes has an interest in these things.

It was almost time for dinner when the day finally cracked.

Shane left the chamber he used for writing letters and shut the heavy wooden door behind him, rolling his shoulders to ease the stiffness from sitting too long. Ink smudged the side of his hand where his glove would cover it later. His brain felt thick with numbers and the awkward compromises of compromise: how much grain could be promised without starving one region or angering another.

He needed air.

Not the smoky warmth of the solar, crowded with talk and paper, but cold air. The kind that bit his lungs and made his eyes sting, that demanded his body remember it was alive.

The thought of the north courtyard slid into his mind without resistance.

He had discovered it by accident two days earlier, following a shortcut one of the younger guards had mentioned. It was smaller than the main yard, ringed with higher walls that cut the wind somewhat, a half-frozen fountain at its centre. In the dusk, the snow there turned a soft blue grey that made the whole place feel strange and almost gentle.

He turned his feet that way now without thinking it was a decision.

When he reached the low door that led to the courtyard and pushed it open, he did so casually, already tugging his cloak tighter around his shoulders.

The first rush of cold against his face made him inhale sharply.

The sky overhead looked bruised, the last remnants of daylight turning the clouds a deep, layered purple. Snow dusted the stones underfoot and clung to the lower edges of the walls. Torches burned in iron brackets, their flames bowing to the occasional gust of wind, not as heavy here as on the ramps.

It was quiet.

The kind of quiet that made sound almost feel like a trespass.

Shane stepped out, boots crunching lightly on the thin crust of fresh snow. His breath came out in pale clouds. He tipped his head back for a moment and closed his eyes, letting the cold sting his skin. This was exactly what he needed. Some air. Some time alone. Some place where nobody else was watchi-

A sound. Soft, behind him. Not the whine of the wind or the crackle of a torch. A footfall that tried to be silent and failed by the width of a breath.

Years of training in a palace full of people who wanted something from him snapped to attention before his conscious mind did.

He started to turn.

Movement exploded at his side.

Something hit him hard from behind his shoulder, the impact slamming the air out of his lungs. He stumbled, boots sliding on the thin layer of snow covering the slick stone underneath. The courtyard spun. His shoulder struck the wall and he went down, hands scraping against ice.

Pain flashed in his knee as it met the ground.

A blade hissed through the air where his chest had been a heartbeat before.

It buried itself in the wooden post of the torch with a thick, ugly sound.

Shane's mind emptied.

He heard his own breath, ragged and loud, and the crunch of feet on snow. Instinct and training wrestled with panic. He scrabbled for purchase, pushing himself up on hands that had gone numb too fast.

A shadow detached itself from the corner of the courtyard.

No time to think.

He surged sideways, fingers closing around the first solid object he could find. His hand wrapped around the rough wood of a training staff, half buried near the wall where someone had left it propped after drills.

He lifted it just as the man reached him.

The attacker wore a thick cloak, hood thrown up, face half-shadowed. A flash of pale skin. A glint of teeth. Another knife in his hand.

Shane swung.

The staff connected with a jarring crack against the man's wrist. The shock travelled up Shane's arms, jolting his shoulders. The knife flew from the attacker's hand and skidded across the courtyard, landing somewhere near the fountain with a faint clatter.

Shane did not feel victorious.

His fingers already hurt with cold, the wood slick in his grip. The ground under his boots was treacherous, the thin layer of snow disguising patches of ice. His heart pounded too fast, breath ripping in and out of his chest in harsh pulls.

The attacker stepped in again.

Shane brought the staff up across his body defensively, the way his tutors had drilled into him years ago. He blocked a blow that jarred his bones, then another, his own counterstrike clumsy and sliding as his foot slipped half an inch.

He was not bad. In any other place, on dry stone or a training field under Hollandia's softer sun, he would have held his own. He had been taught to fight. To protect himself. To stand.

Rozanovan winter did not care.

His right boot hit a patch of ice hidden under the snow. His balance vanished. For a heartbeat there was nothing under him but air and a rush of nausea.

He fell.

The impact drove what little wind he had left from his lungs. The staff skittered from his hands. He saw the attacker above him, knife in hand again, blade catching the torchlight in a streak of silver.

Too slow, his mind supplied, detached and oddly calm. *You are too slow. You are going to die in this courtyard.*

The knife came down.

He did not close his eyes.

A shape slammed into him from the side.

Not the knife. Not the attacker. A heavy, familiar weight, hitting him hard enough to jar every bone in his body and drag him sideways through the snow. The blade whistled past his cheek, close enough that he felt the air move. It struck stone this time with a shriek.

Someone shouted his name.

“Shane!”

There was no mistaking the voice. Even threaded with raw panic, even half torn from a throat that was not meant for pleading, he would have known it anywhere.

The body on top of him shifted, bracing, shielding.

He caught the scent of smoke and winter and something fiercely, horribly familiar.

Ilya.

The world narrowed until there was nothing left but this courtyard.

Shane heard the scuffle of boots and then felt the weight lift, as Ilya pushed up and away, off him, straight toward the man who had tried to drive a knife into his chest.

Later, when he replayed it in his mind, Shane would not be able to say exactly how Ilya moved. It was a blur of motion and sound, more like a storm colliding with a wall than a fight between two men.

At the moment, he could only see snapshots.

Ilya slamming into the attacker like a thrown boulder, both of them hitting the ground in a spray of snow. The flash of steel as the knife swung wildly. A bright line of red blooming

suddenly along Ilya's upper arm, staining his shirt.

The sound Ilya made at that cut was not a cry of pain.

It was a snarl.

Shane had seen him fight before. He had watched from the gallery as Ilya sparred with his generals, had heard stories of campaigns where he had ridden at the head of his army, even tried his own luck once or twice. He had always pictured him as a precise, dangerous fighter when it mattered, the kind who cut through an opponent like a dagger through thin cloth.

This was not that.

This was something older. Rougher. Dangerous in a way that did not look practiced at all.

Ilya fought like a man who had seen the worst the world could throw at him and decided he would not let it hit what mattered.

He did not avoid the blade. He took another slash across his forearm to get close enough. He elbowed the attacker in the throat, knee driving into his ribs. They rolled, grappling, boots sliding on the ice, breath coming out in grunts and half choked curses.

The attacker went for his throat. Ilya twisted, teeth bared, fingers digging into the man's wrist until the knife clattered away.

He hit the man once across the face with his fist.

Then again.

Then, with visible effort, he stopped.

He grabbed the front of the man's cloak and slammed him back against the frozen ground, pinning him there with one knee on his chest. His breath steamed in the air, harsh and ragged.

"Who sent you?" He rasped, Shane's Rozanovan barely able to pick up and translate the words.

The attacker spat blood at him.

Ilya's eyes went flat.

He drove the blade of the knife into the man's side. The attacker went limp. unconscious.

The courtyard rang with the silence that followed.

Shane pushed himself upright on shaking arms. His hands slid on the stone. His lungs burned like he had taken in nothing but ice. He forced air in, forced his body to move, to sit up properly.

Ilya turned and ran to him.

He crossed the distance in what felt like two strides, falling to his knees in front of Shane hard enough that Shane heard the impact even over his own pounding heartbeat.

“Are you hurt?” Ilya demanded.

His hands hovered in the air, inches from Shane’s chest, then drifted helplessly from shoulder to jaw to arms, as though he could not decide where to check first. He did not quite touch, as if afraid that doing so would prove the worst true.

“Shane,” He said, voice breaking on the name. “Did he cut you? Where are you hit? Tell me.”

It took Shane a second to find his voice.

“I’m fine.” He managed. It came out rough. “I think- I fell. But he did not hit-”

“He did not yet.” Ilya snapped. It was not sharp in the way his anger usually was. It had a crack in it, something jagged. “He was above you with a blade, he would have- You would’ve-”

His hands finally landed. On Shane’s shoulders, gripping tightly enough to hurt. He scanned him, eyes moving in quick, frantic passes.

Shane stared back, the force of Ilya’s fear hitting him harder than the fall had.

“Ilya,” He said softly. “I’m okay.”

“You are not.” Ilya insisted. “Your face is white. Your hands are shaking.” He lifted one of Shane’s hands in his own. It trembled visibly. So did Ilya’s. “Look at you. You think this is ‘okay’?”

Shane swallowed hard. “I am alive.”

The words seemed to hit Ilya somewhere behind the ribs.

He let out a breath that shuddered all the way through his frame. His grip on Shane’s hand loosened, then tightened again, as if he could not quite make himself let go.

“I saw him.” Ilya said. “I opened the door and I saw him over you and I thought-”

He did not finish.

He did not need to.

Shane could fill in the rest too easily. The image of himself on the ground, the blade coming down. The speed with which death could arrive in a quiet courtyard in winter.

He reached out before he could think better of it and set his hand on Ilya’s cheek. Ilya’s skin was colder than usual, chilled by the air and the exertion. There was blood on his sleeve, bright against the white and grey of the courtyard.

“Ilya,” he said again. “Look at me.”

Ilya did.

His eyes were wild around the edges, still full of the adrenaline of the fight, but there was something else there too. Something raw and open and unguarded in a way Shane had never seen in him.

“I am alive,” Shane repeated, carefully. “Because of you.”

The muscle in Ilya’s jaw jumped.

For a moment, he seemed to struggle with something, his throat working around words that did not want to be spoken. Snowflakes landed on his hair and melted, leaving damp traces in the darkened curls.

Then he leaned forward until their foreheads touched.

It was not a gentle gesture this time. It was almost like he needed the contact to keep himself upright.

“I cannot lose you.” He said, barely above a whisper.

Shane’s lungs hurt.

Not from the cold. From the way his heart seemed to be pressing against them, too big for the space it had.

His hand slipped from Ilya’s cheek to the back of his neck, fingers sliding into damp curls.

“You are not going to.” He said, because it was the only thing he could think to offer. “You are not.”

“You do not know that.” Ilya said. He pulled back just enough to look at him again, eyes dark. “You step outside for breath and men appear from shadows with knives. You live in castle where half the people still think you are enemy. You married a man whose father died three days after signing treaty. Do you know how risky you have made yourself, solnyshko?”

Shane huffed out a breath that was half a laugh, half a sob. “Apparently very.”

“Very.” Ilya agreed, and for a strange, suspended second, they both teetered on the edge of hysterical laughter.

The sound of boots on stone cut through it.

Torches bobbed at the courtyard entrance. Someone shouted, “Your Majesty,” and then guards were spilling into the space, weapons half drawn, faces stark with alarm as they took in the scene.

The unconscious attacker sprawled in the snow. The king on his knees. The consort with blood on his hands.

Two of them moved toward the fallen man. Another, braver or more foolish, took a step toward Ilya.

“Your Majesty, are you-”

“Take him.” Ilya said without looking away from Shane. His voice had snapped back into ice and command, though the edges were still frayed. He jabbed a bloodied finger at the attacker. “Keep him alive.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The guards scrambled to obey.

The brave one tried again. “You are injured. We should fetch-”

“Later.” Ilya cut him off, sharp enough that the man flinched. “Now is not your time.”

Shane saw the flicker of shock in the guards’ eyes when they realised where the king’s attention was fixed. On whom.

He watched understanding dawn there too, the dawning awareness that their king would bleed and snarl and defy protocol more for the man in his arms than for his own wounds.

It should have felt like pressure.

Instead, Shane felt his throat tighten with something that could have been relief, and might very well be a lot more than that.

Ilya shifted, getting his feet under him. Snow slid as he rose, still holding Shane’s hand. His arm was bleeding freely now, red staining the torn fabric, but he did not seem to notice.

“Can you stand?” He asked, turning his focus back to Shane.

“I think so.” Shane said automatically.

He braced a hand on the ground, tried to push himself up.

His legs did not agree.

The rush of fear, the fall, the cold, the aftermath of nearly dying caught up with his body all at once. His knees buckled. He would have gone right back down if not for Ilya’s grip.

“That is answer.” Ilya said grimly. “No.”

He let go only long enough to shift his hold, and then, before Shane could produce a proper protest, he scooped him up.

Shane let out a startled sound as the world tilted again, this time in a very different way. His arms came up instinctively, clutching at Ilya’s shoulders. He could feel the strength coiled in

him; the easy way he took Shane's weight as if it were nothing.

"I can walk." Shane said faintly, pride fighting with reality.

Ilya's jaw set. "You nearly died." He said. "You are shaken. I am hurt. I will not have you on your feet where you slip again. I carry you."

There was no space in his tone for argument.

Shane swallowed whatever protest remained.

He let himself rest.

His head dropped forward, forehead brushing against Ilya's collarbone, the fabric of his shirt damp and smelling of metal and smoke and something sharp that was probably his own fear. He closed his eyes, not to hide from what had happened, but because keeping them open suddenly felt like too much effort.

He could feel Ilya's heartbeat against his cheek. Fast. Wild. Alive.

"Fuck off out my way." Ilya snapped, and the guards moved as if the winter itself had spoken.

They left the courtyard like that. The unconscious attacker dragged in the opposite direction, snow churned and trampled behind them. Torches flared along the corridor as they entered, light catching on stone and iron and the wide eyes of servants who froze as the strange procession swept past.

A king streaked with blood.

A consort carried in his arms.

Shane felt, distantly, the weight of their stares. The whispers that would follow. The stories that would spring up before the night was over.

He also felt the way Ilya's hold tightened every time his steps hit a rough patch, as if he expected the ground itself to reach up and snatch Shane away.

It was ridiculous. It was overprotective. It was uncomfortable, in a pride-bruising kind of way.

It was also the safest he had felt in a very long time.

He let his fingers curl more securely into Ilya's shirt, clinging without meaning to.

Ilya looked down at him just once, brief and fierce.

"We will find who did this." He said, voice low and full of something dark. "We will end them. But first, we make sure you are truly not hurt. That is all I care about until then."

Shane's chest ached.

It was not a pleasant ache. It was sharp and expanding and made it hard to breathe correctly. At the same time, it was the best thing he had ever felt.

He had been the centre of people's plans before. The object of schemes. The hinge on which treaties turned. Different kings and lords had cared, in their way, about what happened to him, because of what it meant.

This felt different.

This felt like Ilya cared not because he was Hollandia's prince or Rozanova's consort or a piece on a board.

But because he was Shane.

The man in his arms.

The one he had hurled himself into danger to protect without a second's thought.

He pressed his face a little more firmly into Ilya's shoulder, pretending it was to shield his eyes from the torchlight.

In truth, it was to hide the expression he could feel fighting its way onto his face. The one that would give away what his chest already knew, even if the rest of him was still scrambling to catch up.

He swallowed hard.

He would die for me. Shane thought, dazed.

The thought did not feel theoretical. It felt as solid as the arms around him, as real as the blood on Ilya's sleeve, still gushing from his wound.

Another followed it, quieter, more terrifying.

I love him.

The corridor seemed to stretch on forever, full of echoes and footsteps and whispered shock, but all of that blurred at the edges. The only clear thing in the centre of his world was the steady, staggering, stubborn warmth of the man carrying him.

Whatever came next, whatever knives still waited in the shadows of this castle and this peace and this future, one thing felt certain now in a way nothing else did.

He was not facing it alone.

The fire had burned low by the time the surgeon finished.

Shane sat on the edge of the bed, bare feet pressed into the thick rug, fingers curled hard into the covers to keep them from shaking. His cloak and coat lay discarded over a chair, dark with melted snow. Someone had taken his boots away to dry. His shirt was half open, his sleeves rolled to the elbow, the faint red marks where the surgeon's hands had pressed at his ribs already fading.

There was nothing wrong with him. The surgeon had said so three times.

It did not feel true.

He still felt the echo of ice under his boots, of the ground leaving him, of the knife on its way down. The courtyard lived behind his eyes every time he blinked. Sometimes he saw the attacker. Sometimes he saw nothing at all, only the steel, bright and indifferent.

Sometimes he saw Ilya throwing himself between them, bare handed and furious.

Behind him, near the fire, the surgeon wound fresh linen around Ilya's arm. Ilya was half turned in Shane's direction on the chair, bare from the waist up, skin gleaming in the heat. Blood streaked the bandage where the stitches had pulled earlier when he had refused to sit still until he had watched every second of the surgeon's examination of Shane.

He had not spoken once during that part. Only watched. Eyes flinty and intent, as if he could will any hidden hurt to show itself on the surface.

The surgeon's hands were steady. Old, clever fingers that smelled of herbs and sharp spirits. He tied off the last of the bandage and smoothed it with the care of a man who liked his patients to stay alive.

"There." He said in Rozanovan. Then, in careful Hollandian after turning towards Shane. "No more than a slice, Majesty. He was lucky."

Shane nodded without looking away from his own hands. They were clean. No blood. Only the smallest of scrapes along one knuckle from catching himself on the stone.

Lucky.

He did not feel lucky. He felt like something had reached into his chest and given everything there a good hard twist.

The surgeon turned to him one last time.

"No pain in the head?" He asked. "No ringing ears, no sickness?"

"No." Shane said. His voice came out hoarse. He cleared his throat. "Only tired."

"That is normal, after big fright." The surgeon said. His gaze softened, the way older people's sometimes did when looking at someone who reminded them of their own children. "Rest. Warmth. Food, when you can keep it down. No fighting, no riding, nothing that makes your heart wilder than it already is."

“My heart is fine.” Shane muttered.

Behind him, Ilya made a quiet sound that might have been agreement or disbelief.

The surgeon bowed to Ilya, then to Shane. “I will leave salve and more linen. Change the dressing tomorrow. Send for me if he has fever.” This to Ilya again.

“I will.” Ilya said.

He did not say: *if I let him out of my sight long enough to need you.*

The door opened. Cold crept in around the edges for an instant as the surgeon stepped out. It clicked shut again. The muffled thump of the bar dropping back into place on the outside sounded through the wood.

The room felt too quiet now. Only the low pop of the fire and the faint hiss of the wind outside remained.

Ilya did not move from the chair at first.

Shane could feel his gaze, a heavy, tangible thing resting between his shoulder blades. He stared down at his hands and watched the tremor in them become noticeable again now that the surgeon’s steady presence was gone.

They had checked every inch of him. Hands on his scalp, searching for bumps. Fingers along his ribs. Palms pressed against his spine while he bent, straightened, turned. His knees. His ankles. The back of his neck. All while Ilya stood close enough that Shane could feel the heat from him but could not quite touch.

It had been mortifying. It had also been oddly grounding. Each small confirmation that he was not cracked or broken or bleeding had pulled him back to himself, one heartbeat at a time.

It still felt like he was not quite all the way here.

“Shane,” Ilya said quietly. “Come here.”

The words were gentle. There was no command in them, no sharp edge, only a low pull.

Shane’s fingers tightened briefly on the blanket. Then he slid off the bed and crossed the few steps to the fire without quite looking up.

Ilya sat back in his chair, one leg stretched out, the other bent. His bandaged arm rested in his lap. With the light behind him and his hair mussed, he looked less like a king and more like some rough carved statue of a war god that someone had tried to make comfortable.

The bandage around his upper arm was stark white against skin that had flushed from the heat of the fire. Blood had already bloomed through in one place, a darker patch. Shane’s stomach clenched at the sight.

“You are bleeding again.” He said.

“I am fine.” Ilya replied.

“You are not fine!” Shane snapped. The burst of anger surprised both of them. “You are stitched together and pretending it does not hurt, which is not the same thing.”

One corner of Ilya’s mouth twitched. Not enough to be a smile. “You sound like surgeon.”

“Perhaps he has the right idea.” Shane said. The energy that had nowhere to go in his hands moved to his mouth instead. “Someone should.”

Ilya watched him for a heartbeat longer, then lifted his uninjured hand and reached out.

“Come here,” He said again, softer this time. “Please.”

It was the please that did it.

Shane moved without resisting. Ilya’s hand found his hip, guided him gently, and the next thing he knew he was standing between Ilya’s knees, close enough that he could feel the heat of Ilya’s chest through his own shirt.

For a moment they just stayed like that, the space between them full of every unsaid thing.

Then Ilya’s grip shifted. He gave a careful tug.

“Sit.” He murmured.

Shane stared at him. “Where?”

Ilya huffed a quiet breath, both exasperated and fond. “Here.”

He tapped his thigh. His good arm curved in invitation.

“You will hurt yourself.” Shane objected weakly.

“I am stronger than I look,” Ilya said. “Do not argue with man who just knocked deadly attacker out with one hand.”

It was absurd. It was also, somehow, exactly what Shane wanted.

His body chose before his pride could get in the way.

He climbed awkwardly into Ilya’s lap, one knee on the chair first, then the other, turning so he faced him. It felt precarious for a heartbeat, as if he might overbalance and topple them both to the floor.

Then Ilya’s arm curled fully around his waist, pulling him closer like this was all he had ever needed in his life, and the precariousness turned into something else.

Steady.

Shane drew his legs in until he was straddling Ilya's thighs, his knees bracketing Ilya's hips. His arms went somewhere on their own, first hovering, then sliding carefully over Ilya's shoulders. He did not know where to put his hands that did not feel too much or not enough, so he let them settle lightly, fingers brushing the back of Ilya's neck, moving nervously through damp curls.

He was suddenly very aware of the fact that Ilya was shirtless.

Warm skin met the inside of his wrists. The heat of the fire gilded every line of him. Muscles shifted under Shane's palms as Ilya adjusted his hold, trying to account for the bandaged arm without loosening his grip.

For a few long breaths, they did not speak.

Shane pressed his face into the curve where Ilya's neck met his shoulder and finally, finally let go.

The first sound that came out of him surprised him. It was small and sharp, cut free from somewhere under his ribs. Once it was out, others followed. Not sobs, not really, more like the kind of ragged breaths a man might take when he had been running for a long time and had finally stopped.

His shoulders shook with the power of them.

Ilya held him through it. His good arm remained wrapped firmly around Shane's back. The bandaged one pressed against him more gently, but still there. He said nothing at first, only rested his cheek against Shane's hair. Shane could feel the thud of his heart in his chest, too fast and racing to be anything but fear.

"You could have died." Shane said, voice muffled against his skin. "You could have died, and I would have had to sit in that courtyard and think about how you were only hit because I was there. Because you ran to me."

Ilya's breath moved against his hair. "Shane."

"You did not even have a sword." Shane pushed on, the words gaining speed now that they had somewhere to go. "You just threw yourself at him like the ground would break for you. He could have cut your throat before you reached him. He could have gone around you. He could have gone through you. You did not stop to think for even one second and you make everyone else think about everything all the time."

"I had to." Ilya said softly.

"No." Shane said. He pulled back enough to glare at him, tears hot on his face. "You did not. You are the king. You are not meant to be the one flinging yourself at men with knives. You are meant to shout and let everyone else do it. That is how this works. That is how this is supposed to work."

"I am your husband." Ilya said.

The word slid between them and settled somewhere heavy.

Shane's anger tripped over it, stumbled, and re-formed.

"That does not mean you get to decide you are expendable." He said, but the fight had gone out of his voice. "It does not mean you get to terrify me like that."

Ilya's jaw flexed.

"I am truly sorry I scared you." He said. "I saw you on ground," Ilya continued, his voice turning rough around the edges, the words dragging as if they hurt to say with layers of heavy emotion behind them. "I saw the knife. For second, before I moved, it felt like... like there was no more air in the world. Like everything I had left, everything I was trying to build, finished there."

His throat worked.

"I was not thinking of Rozanova." He went on. "Not of treaty, not of walls, not of anything but getting between you and that blade. I have never, ever been afraid like that. Not when I was boy, not when we went into battle and everyone thought we would die. Never."

Shane's heart hammered against his ribs.

"I am still afraid." Ilya said, and this time there was no steel in it at all as he tightened his grip around Shane ever so slightly. Only honesty, raw and bare. "I am afraid you will slip away from me. That I will not reach you in time next time. That I will turn my head and you will be... gone. That I will not be enough and someone will take you from me when all I want is to keep you safe. Forever."

The word hung there between them, too big, too heavy.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again, meeting Shane's gaze head on.

"I love you." He whispered.

There was no build up. No careful lead in. He laid the words down like cards on a table, nothing held back, nothing hedged.

For a heartbeat, Shane thought his own heart had simply stopped.

His breath went thin. His fingers tightened unconsciously where they rested at the back of Ilya's neck. His vision blurred, not from tears this time but from the sheer force of everything backing up inside him, desperate for a way out.

"I-" He managed. Then stopped.

Ilya's expression shuttered by an inch, as if he had been simply unable to keep the words down any longer and was now afraid of the answer.

“You do not have to say anything.” He said a little too quickly. “I did not tell you to make you-”

“I love you too.” Shane said.

The words came out in a rush, imperfect and shaky, but true.

“I love you too.” He said again, more firmly. “You ridiculous man. You stupid, brave, idiotic man. I love you and you terrify me and I hate that you think you are the only one allowed to be scared.”

Something in Ilya’s face crumpled.

The laugh that broke out of him was half a sob. He did not bother to hide it. For once, he did not seem to care about who might see, who might hear, what it said about him. His forehead dropped to rest against Shane’s shoulder. His shoulders shook hard with the impact of raw emotion.

Shane felt damp warmth against his collarbone.

He pretended not to notice.

Instead, he wrapped his arms around Ilya’s shoulders and held on, fingers digging into the strong line of his back, his own eyes closing as he held his husband, his love.

They stayed like that for longer than Shane could measure. Time went oddly soft. The fire crackled. The wind clawed against the shutters. Somewhere far away, boots rang on stone as guards changed shifts.

None of it reached them.

Eventually, Ilya’s breathing evened out again. The trembling eased. He drew back a little, enough to see Shane’s face, though he did not let go of his waist.

Ilya’s eyes were red at the edges now, the lashes clumped slightly. There was a softness in his expression that made Shane’s stomach do an unhelpful thing.

“You should not look at me like that after nearly dying.” Ilya muttered, regaining some of his usual composure.

“Like what?” Shane asked.

“Like I am answer to everything.” Ilya said.

Shane huffed. “I wouldn’t have to if you weren’t literally the reason that I’m still breathing.”

“Da.” Ilya finally conceded. “I am absolute hero of day.”

They both laughed, small and crooked and tired.

Shane became aware, slowly, that he was still in Ilya's lap.

His knees were pressed to either side of Ilya's hips. His thighs bracketed Ilya's. His hands were still on bare skin. Every breath pressed his chest lightly against Ilya's. He could feel the rise and fall of him. He could feel warmth everywhere they touched.

Heat crept up his neck in a way that had nothing to do with the fire.

Ilya noticed the change even before Shane understood it himself.

"You shake again." He said, frowning. His hand slid up Shane's spine in a soothing stroke that did entirely different things than Ilya was intending. "Are you dizzy? Is it too cold? Tell me."

Shane shook his head quickly. "No. No, I just..."

He trailed off, a blush forming on his cheeks as he stared into the middle distance behind Ilya.

Ilya's brows drew together. "Shane," He said, gentle and concerned. "If something is wrong, you must tell me. I cannot fix what I do not know."

"It is not wrong." Shane blurted.

He could feel his heart pounding now against his ribs. His mouth had gone dry. He licked his lips instinctively and saw Ilya's gaze flicker down to follow the movement before snapping back up.

"Then what?" Ilya asked. "You are scaring me again."

Shane let out a breath that shook on the way out. He swallowed, closed his eyes for a second, opened them again.

"Do you remember," He said, very quietly, "what you said after the wedding?"

Ilya blinked.

"We said many things after wedding." He replied. "You must be more specific."

Shane felt his face flame even further. "In here." He managed. "When we were alone. You said... you said you were not going to take me apart."

Understanding dawned in Ilya's expression. It arrived in pieces. First, the recall. Then the flinch, as if he believed he had offended. Then defence.

"I said that so you would know I would not force you." He said quickly. "That I would not expect you to give me your body because the treaty said so. I did not want you to think I saw you as duty to be done."

"I know." Shane said.

The memory of that night flickered between them. The way Ilya had stopped at the threshold, hands gentle, voice low as he had promised there would be no demands, no tests, no spectacle. That Shane's body remained his own, no matter what crowns and treaties said.

"I was grateful," Shane went on. "For that. For you saying it. I still am."

"Good." Ilya said. Some of the tension eased out of his shoulders. "Then why bring it now?"

Shane's fingers tightened in the hair at the nape of Ilya's neck.

"Because," He said, and the word shook, "I think I would like that. Now."

Silence.

Ilya stared at him.

"Like what?" He asked slowly, as if afraid to have heard correctly.

Shane swallowed again, the heat in his face almost painful now. He forced himself to hold Ilya's gaze. Forced himself not to look away.

"To be taken apart." He answered. His voice was barely above a whisper. "By you."

For a moment, Ilya did not move at all.

If Shane had not been in his arms, feeling the rapid rise and fall of his chest, he might have thought he had turned to stone. His eyes darkened, the pupils widening, his mouth parting on a breath.

"Shane," He said. The name came out almost strangled. "Do not say this unless you are sure."

"I am sure." Shane said, too fast. Then, slower, more carefully, "I am frightened. I do not know exactly how this will go. Everything is... a lot right now. But I am sure that I want you. That I want to be with you in that way. That I want it to be you who... who undoes me."

The word felt scandalous in his mouth and right at the same time.

He reached up and cupped Ilya's face again, as if to anchor him.

"I love you." He spoke. "And I nearly died in a courtyard today. I do not want to keep waiting until the world is better or safer or easier. I do not think it will ever be. I want this now. While I can still tell you that I want it."

Ilya let out a breath that sounded like it had been held for years.

His hands tightened at Shane's waist, fingers digging in just enough to mark the moment.

"You are sure." He repeated, as if saying it himself would make it more real. "You want this. With me. Not to prove something. Not because you think you must. Because you want."

“Yes.” Shane said.

A slow, bright grin broke across Ilya’s face then, a thing of such unguarded joy that it made Shane’s chest ache.

“You have no idea,” Ilya said softly. “How many times I have imagined you saying that.”

Shane’s breath stuttered.

“Then,” He whispered. “Take me to bed.”

For a heartbeat nothing happened.

Then Ilya moved.

He stood while still holding him, rising from the chair with Shane in his arms as if he weighed nothing at all, and turned towards the bed.

When his back finally met the cool linen of the sheets, Shane did not feel cold.

He felt seen.

He felt wanted.

He felt, for the first time since stepping into this castle of snow and stone and watching eyes, that he was exactly where he was meant to be.

The linen was cool against Shane’s shoulder blades, the fire a soft roar somewhere to his right, the rest of the room blurred at the edges. His pulse thundered loud enough that he could feel it in his throat, in his fingertips, in his belly.

Ilya was still standing at the bedside.

He looked like he’d been carved out of the same stone as the castle and then left too close to the fire. Bare from the waist up, skin flushed by heat and exertion, curls mussed, bandage glaring white and dark red on his arm. His chest rose and fell a little too fast. He stared down at Shane with an intensity that made Shane feel like he might dissolve if it went on much longer.

For the first time in his life, he had no idea what to do with his hands.

He settled for curling them lightly on the linen by his sides, fingers flexing against the fabric. It didn’t help. They still shook.

Ilya swallowed, the movement visible in his throat.

Then he knelt on the mattress.

The bed dipped under his weight. Shane’s body tilted instinctively towards the warmth of him, even as his thoughts skittered in every direction at once. Ilya braced his good hand near

Shane's head, the bandaged arm held a little away as if he was consciously accounting for it.

He didn't lie on him. He didn't crowd.

He hovered, close enough that Shane could feel the heat radiating off his skin, close enough to smell smoke and salt and the faint trace of whatever herbs the surgeon had used. His eyes searched Shane's face carefully, like he was looking for something that would either give him permission or send him retreating.

"If you want to stop," He said quietly. "You say the word. Any time. You understand?"

His accent wrapped around the words, heavier at the edges, like he couldn't quite keep a lid on himself.

Shane's throat felt too tight.

He managed a nod. Then realised that wasn't enough, not for this.

"Ilya," He said. "I want this. I want you inside me."

That did something to Ilya's control. Shane watched it happen; the way his pupils widened, the way his fingers dug into the linen by Shane's head, the way his breath caught mid-inhale.

"You will be the death of me." He muttered, the words fond and a little wrecked.

He bent down.

The kiss, when it came, was different.

All the ones before had been soft, cautious things. Testing the ground. Small sips, shared in stolen corners and quiet rooms. This one was deeper from the start, mouth sealing firmly over Shane's with different intent.

Shane's body answered before his mind caught up.

His hands uncurled from the linen and slid up, finding the warm line of Ilya's waist, then his ribs, then his shoulders. Ilya made a small sound against his mouth when Shane's fingers dug in there, half gasp, half laugh, like he'd been waiting for that touch and hadn't quite dared expect it.

Ilya's tongue brushed his lower lip in a silent request. Shane's pulse stumbled. He opened without thinking, and the kiss deepened.

It was messy. Too much teeth at one point, a half-stifled laugh when their noses knocked in an awkward angle, a shared breath that turned into another kiss before either of them had quite meant to start again. It wasn't the graceful, perfectly choreographed sort of encounter Shane had half assumed nobles were meant to have.

It was better.

It was real.

By the time Ilya finally pulled back, Shane was breathless and a little dizzy in the way that had nothing to do with shock and everything to do with lack of air.

Ilya was looking at him like he was something sacred and also like he wanted to ruin him in the best possible way.

“May I touch you?” He asked.

The question made Shane’s chest squeeze.

“You already are.” He said, dazed.

“More.” Ilya said. “I want to... see you. Properly.” His hand hovered for a second over Shane’s chest, not quite touching, as if restrained by some invisible barrier. “I want to take this all off. If you let me.”

Shane swallowed hard. “Yes.”

Ilya’s hand settled on his open shirt, fingers tracing over his skin.

They had been in such a rush in the courtyard. A blur of motion and blood and fear. Now, every small act felt like a deliberate slowing of the world.

Ilya pushed the shirt open further, fully baring Shane’s chest. The air was cool enough to raise a faint shiver over his skin. Ilya leaned down and kissed the centre of his sternum, then a little to the side, as if he were marking the location of his heart.

Shane made a small, involuntary sound.

“Too cold?” Ilya asked, lifting his head a fraction. His voice was rougher now, breath warm against the spot he’d just kissed.

Shane shook his head. “No. Just... you.”

A slow grin tugged at the corner of Ilya’s mouth. “Good answer.”

He dipped his head again, mouth following the line of Shane’s collarbone, then lower. Each press of lips was deliberate, almost leisurely. He wasn’t trying to overwhelm; he was mapping.

Shane had never been more aware of his own body. Of where his skin was thin and sensitive, of how every breath seemed to set his nerve endings alight. His hands found Ilya’s shoulders again, fingers flexing against the solid muscle there.

He wanted.

He wanted in a way that made his stomach flip and his pulse race and his mind skitter to the edges of what might come and then shy back because it was too much all at once. But

beneath all of that, running like a current, was a simple, solid certainty: he wanted it to be Ilya.

He wanted it to be now.

Ilya's mouth reached his abdomen, the soft indent just above his navel. He kissed there too, then looked up, hair falling partly into his eyes.

"Shane," He said. "If I do anything you do not like, you tell me. If you need me to slow, I slow. If you need me to stop, I stop. You only have to say."

"I know." Shane said softly.

He did. That was the thing. For all of Ilya's rough edges and sharp jokes, there had never been a moment where he'd made Shane feel cornered. Held, yes. Pushed, sometimes, into seeing things he didn't want to. But never trapped.

It was that knowledge, more than anything, that steadied him enough to reach down and slide his own hands along Ilya's shoulders, thumbs stroking the ridge of his collarbones.

"Can... can I touch you too?" He asked.

The expression that crossed Ilya's face was almost comic in its mixture of adoration and disbelief.

"Bozhe moi." He muttered. "You ask as if I am saint, not man." He caught Shane's hand and pressed a kiss to his palm. "You can touch me wherever you like."

Shane rolled his eyes, heat creeping up his neck. "Stop making it sound like that."

"Like what?" Ilya's eyes sparkled, but his voice stayed low, intimate. "Like you are very free to do anything you want to me? I will not stop making it sound like that. It is true."

"Idiot." Shane muttered, fondness cutting through the embarrassment.

He slid his hand from Ilya's collarbone down his chest, tracing the line of muscle there, the faint dusting of hair. Ilya inhaled sharply, as if the touch surprised him. Shane took courage from that and let his palm settle flat over Ilya's sternum, feeling the thump of his heart under his skin.

It was fast.

"Not just mine then."

Ilya's laugh was soft and breathless. "Do not get arrogant, solnyshko."

Shane smiled, small and unsteady.

The bits of humour threaded through the heat made it easier to keep breathing.

They worked out of the rest of their clothes in a series of fumbling, stop-start movements. There was nothing smooth about it. Shane got his knee tangled in his own trousers at one point. Ilya cursed under his breath when his bandaged arm twinged as he tried to help.

They managed between them.

By the time the last layer of fabric hit the floor, Shane felt flushed all over and had lost track of where exactly he was meant to be looking. His own nudity was one thing. He could handle that, barely, with the awareness that the room was warm and Ilya's gaze was soft and nothing about this felt judging.

Seeing Ilya like that, fully, was another matter.

He tried to be subtle about it. A flick of his eyes, a stolen glance. His curiosity had other opinions. It dragged his gaze down and back up, tracing the lines of Ilya's thighs, the curve of his hip, the breadth of his chest, the size of his...

He must have lingered, because Ilya's mouth quirked.

"Like what you see?" He asked.

Shane's face went hot enough he was surprised the snow outside didn't melt. "You are impossible."

"That is not answer." Ilya said.

"You know the answer." Shane retorted.

Ilya's grin softened into something less teasing and more honest. "Da." He said quietly. "Still nice to hear."

Shane opened his mouth to say something clever. What came out instead was a small, breathy noise as Ilya lowered himself over him, skin to skin.

The contact was overwhelming.

Heat poured into him everywhere they touched; chest against chest, thighs slotting together, arms winding around shoulders and backs. Ilya's weight was solid without being crushing, braced partly on his good arm and partly on his knees. Shane felt enclosed, surrounded, and instead of panicking, his body responded with a looseness he hadn't known he could have.

He hooked his legs higher around Ilya's hips to keep him there.

"Shane." Ilya murmured, voice rough.

He kissed him again, slower this time, savouring. Shane opened to him with less hesitation, letting himself lean into the slide of lips, the press and retreat and press again. Every time Ilya deepened the kiss, something in Shane coiled tighter, drawn along.

He didn't realise he'd made a noise until Ilya swallowed it, groaning quietly in response.

“Do not make sounds like that,” Ilya said, breaking away just enough to speak. His forehead rested against Shane’s. His breath ghosted over Shane’s mouth. “I am trying to go slow.”

“Going slow is overrated.” Shane wheezed.

Ilya laughed, the sound low and incredulous.

“Yes,” He said. “And yet, I prefer you do not tear when I touch you. I think you will not enjoy that.”

The bluntness should have embarrassed Shane. It did, a little. It also grounded him. There was something comforting about the practical considerations threaded through desire.

“What... what exactly are you planning?” Shane asked, hearing the wobble in his own voice and pushing through anyway.

Ilya pulled back enough to look him in the eye. His hand slid down, over Shane’s side, settling warm and broad on his hip, gentle fingers digging into the soft flesh of his ass.

“I want to be inside you.” He said. No dressing it up. No coyness. Just the truth, delivered with a reverence that made Shane’s breath catch. “If you still want that, too.”

Shane did not trust his voice for a moment.

He nodded, then forced the words out anyway, because he remembered Ilya asking for precision.

“Yes.” He whispered. “I want you inside me.”

Colour flared high on Ilya’s cheekbones. He leaned down and kissed him once, hard and quick, as if unable to help himself.

“Good.” He murmured.

He shifted then, reaching blindly to the small table by the bed where the surgeon had left salves and herbs. His fingers closed around a small pot instead; one he’d had before, for easing chapped skin in winter.

“Not exactly made for this,” Ilya muttered. “But will do. Will have better for next time.”

Shane huffed a breathless laugh. “Truly romantic.”

“You want romance, I put flowers later.” Ilya said. His tone was dry; his hands were careful. “Right now, I want you not to curse my name forever.”

He opened the pot and scooped a small amount of the oil onto his fingers, rubbing his thumb over them until it shone. The smell was faintly herbal, sharper than it would have been if actually meant for this, but not unpleasant.

“Up a little.” He said gently.

Heat surged to Shane's face again. He shifted, lifting his hips and spreading his thighs more. The position made him feel terribly exposed, and for a second nerves flared sharp.

"Hey," Ilya said, hand sliding along his thigh, squeezing lightly. "Look at me, not at ceiling."

Shane dragged his gaze back to him.

"It is only me." Ilya reminded him. "Only us. If you want to stop, say it. If you need break, we breathe. Yes?"

"Yes." Shane said. Saying it helped.

Ilya nodded once, then moved his hand back between Shane's thighs.

The first touch of slicked fingers at his entrance made him flinch, more in startlement than pain.

"Easy." Ilya murmured. "Breathe, solnyshko. In, out. Good. Like that."

Shane tried. He focused on Ilya's face; on the concentration there, the way his mouth pressed into a line, the way his brows drew together. He focused on the warmth of Ilya's other hand where it rested on his hip, anchoring him.

When the first finger slipped carefully inside, it was... strange.

Not pain. Not exactly. Unfamiliar pressure, a stretching that made his muscles tense automatically. Ilya moved with frustrating patience, barely more than the width of a nail at first, letting Shane adjust to the sensation.

"Breathe." He said again. "Tell me how it feels."

Shane blew out a shaky breath. "Weird." He admitted. "Full. Not... not bad."

"Not bad is not good enough," Ilya said. "Tap my arm if you need me to stop. Even if you cannot make words, yes?"

Shane nodded, a little amused despite the situation by Ilya's determination to treat him so gently. The care in it made his chest tight.

The second finger was more. He hissed quietly as Ilya eased it in alongside the first, his body trying to decide whether this counted as too much or not enough. The stretch bordered on uncomfortable, then shifted under Ilya's patient movements into something else.

The first tiny flicker of pleasure caught him off guard.

He let out a startled sound. Ilya's eyes snapped up to his face at once.

"Pain?" He asked.

"No!" Shane said quickly. "Just... something. Different."

Ilya's mouth curved. "Good different?"

Shane swallowed. "Yes."

"Then more of that." Ilya murmured.

His fingers moved again, a little deeper this time, a little more pressure. One small adjustment had Shane's back arching off the mattress, his hand flying to clutch at Ilya's forearm as his length throbbed suddenly between his legs.

"Oh!" He let out.

Ilya's grin was wicked and fond all at once. "There." He said. "I like that sound."

He hit that spot again and again, gently, until Shane was panting, thighs trembling, torn between pushing back against the sensation and twisting away from how intense it felt.

By the time Ilya added a third finger, his body accepted it with only a brief flare of discomfort. The stretch felt right now, necessary, like his body had finally remembered that it could make room.

He had not expected it to feel like this.

He had expected something more clinical, perhaps. More obligation. Less... pleasure.

"You are doing very well." Ilya murmured, voice slipping into the same cadence he used when calming a skittish horse or a frightened child, except much rougher. "Look at you. Taking my fingers so well. And soon all of me. Moya radost."

The praise should have embarrassed Shane. Instead, his cock throbbed again in appreciation, leaking onto his stomach as he let out a small noise in reply.

He was distantly aware that he was writhing, that his hips kept trying to follow the rhythm of Ilya's hand, that his own noises were getting higher, softer, more helpless. If anyone else had pointed it out, he would have died on the spot.

Ilya's eyes held nothing but admiration.

When he finally withdrew his fingers, Shane almost whined.

"Easy." Ilya soothed. He reached for the pot again, taking the oil and hissing softly as he put a generous amount of it on his cock. It looked hard. It looked angry. It looked huge. "I know. I know. Nearly there."

"Nearly-" Shane broke off, staring at the size of him.

The idea that what had just happened had been the easy part hit him belatedly. Nerves spiked, sharp and bright. He shifted against the sheets, suddenly acutely aware of how open he was, how much bigger Ilya had felt even in his hand as he got to touch him for a moment, how he was about to-

“Hey.” Ilya said again.

He leaned forward, bracing himself with his bandaged arm very carefully beside Shane’s shoulder, the other hand coming up to cup his cheek. Their foreheads touched. His eyes were steady, serious through the heat.

“Last time I ask before I enter you.” He said. “Are you sure?”

Shane thought of the courtyard. Of cold stone and steel and the knowledge that everything could end in the space of a breath.

He thought of the way Ilya’s voice had broken when he said ‘I love you’.

He thought of the way his own had when he said it back.

“Yes.” He whispered. “I want this. With you.”

Something fierce and fragile flared in Ilya’s gaze.

“Fuck.” He murmured. “Hold on to me.”

Shane obeyed.

He wrapped his arms around Ilya’s shoulders, fingers burying in his curls. Ilya reached down between them, guiding himself to where he needed to be. The first nudge of his cock at Shane’s entrance drew a gasp from both of them.

“Breathe.” Ilya said, the word sounding like a reminder for himself as much as for Shane.

He pushed in slowly.

The stretch was a burn this time. Not sharp enough to be pain that made him flinch away, but enough that Shane’s fingers tightened in his hair, his eyes squeezing shut on instinct. His breath stuttered.

“Shane.” Ilya said, immediately stilling. His voice shook. “Talk to me. Too much?”

Shane forced his eyes open.

He found Ilya’s face inches from his own; every line there etched with restraint. Every muscle in his body held taut, as if it was taking everything in him not to move.

“It’s...” Shane searched for the word. “Intense.”

“If it hurts, I stop.” Ilya said. He sounded like he meant it. Like he would pull back and never mention it again if Shane asked.

“I don’t want you to stop.” Shane said.

He swallowed, tried to remember the way Ilya had told him to breathe before. In, out. Letting his body unclench around the intrusion instead of gripping down against it. Slowly, gradually,

the heat shifted from raw stretch into something else.

“Okay.” He whispered. “Move. Just... slow.”

Ilya nodded once, a jerky movement, then pushed in a little more.

Shane’s back arched. His legs tightened around Ilya’s waist, heels digging into his lower back. The fullness was almost overwhelming now, but underneath it — there, like a glow — was that same strange flicker he’d felt around Ilya’s fingers, only deeper.

When Ilya was finally fully inside him, he stopped again, shuddering.

“Bozhe.” He whispered. “You feel... you have no idea.”

“Tell me later.” Shane managed. “Move now.”

A breathless laugh escaped Ilya. “Bossy prince.”

“Husband,” Shane corrected, surprising himself. “I’m your husband.”

Ilya’s expression softened in a way that almost undid Shane more than anything else.

“Da.” He said. “My husband.”

He pulled back, just a fraction, then pressed in again.

The drag of it, the shift in angle, had Shane making a sound he’d never heard from his own mouth before. Ilya swallowed it in a kiss, hips starting to move in a slow, careful rhythm that built rather than overwhelmed.

It was not perfect. The bed creaked. Ilya’s arm protested once when he put weight on it wrong and he swore, readjusting his grip. Their teeth knocked again at one particularly enthusiastic thrust.

Shane found he didn’t care.

The feeling of Ilya inside him, the slide and pull, the way every push seemed to send heat flaring out along his spine and pooling low in his belly, did not leave room for much self-consciousness. He clung to Ilya and let himself be moved, let himself be opened.

“You are so good.” Ilya murmured against his mouth, between kisses. “Look at you. Taking me so well. My beautiful boy.”

Shane whined at that, mortified and turned on in equal measure.

“I am not-” He began to protest.

“You are.” Ilya interrupted. He shifted his angle slightly, and the next thrust struck that place inside Shane that made his vision spark. “You are. Hear yourself. Feel yourself. You are perfect.”

The words poured over him, rough and adoring, in Rozanovan and Hollandian both. Solnyshko. Moya lyubov. Moya radost. My love.

He found himself answering without thinking.

“Ilya,” He gasped. “Ilya, I- gods- I love you-”

Ilya’s rhythm stuttered.

“Say it again.” He groaned.

“I love you.” Shane said, louder this time, as if the words themselves propelled the pleasure higher. “I love you-”

Whatever fragile hold Ilya had on himself faltered there.

He murmured something fervent and urgent in his own language, hips moving a little faster now, still careful not to tip over into rough, still watching Shane’s face as if it were the most important thing in the room. It was.

The pressure built, coiling tighter and tighter in Shane’s stomach. Each thrust, each drag of Ilya inside him, each brush of their skin together wound it further. His own cock was pinned between them, friction building with every movement.

He did not know where to put his hands, so he put them everywhere. On Ilya’s shoulders. In his hair. On his back, raking down in desperate little scrapes that earned him bitten-off curses.

“Shane.” Ilya said, the word wrecked. “I am- I do not- I cannot-”

“Don’t stop.” Shane managed. His voice sounded strange to his own ears, high and breathless. “Please Ilya, don’t- I’m so close-”

A final thrust did it.

Shane tumbled over first.

The pleasure snapped through him so suddenly he lost track of his own body for a second. Everything went tight, then blissfully, shatteringly loose. His back arched, a cry tearing itself from his throat, his vision going white at the edges.

He dimly registered warmth on his stomach, wetness between them, the sound of Ilya’s name on his own lips again and again.

The clench around Ilya as he came pulled a hoarse, broken sound from the other man. Ilya’s hips jerked, his thrusts going erratic for a handful of seconds before he stilled, buried deep, shaking.

He came with his face pressed into Shane’s neck, his breath hot and uneven against his skin. Shane felt the pulse of it inside him, the way every muscle in Ilya’s body tensed and then loosened, the way his fingers dug into his hips as if to keep him anchored.

For a while, there was nothing but the sound of their breathing.

Ilya sagged carefully, catching himself on his forearms before he could collapse fully. He stayed there for a moment, forehead resting against Shane's collarbone, eyes closed.

Shane lay boneless beneath him, every limb heavy and strange.

He felt... wrecked. In the best possible way. His body hummed, the usual tight coil of anxiety replaced by a soft, exhausted glow. The ache between his thighs was already there, deepening as his muscles began to notice what they'd been through, but it was a good ache. A claimed ache.

"Are you alive?" Ilya mumbled eventually, voice muffled against his skin.

"I think so." Shane croaked.

"Good." Ilya breathed. "Would be very embarrassing if you died during sex. Bad for my reputation."

Shane snorted, the laugh bubbling out of him almost against his will. "You are terrible."

"Yes." Ilya agreed. "But you love me, so you are stuck."

Shane's chest tightened in a different way. "I am." He said. "Happily."

That drew a small, shattered sound from Ilya. He lifted his head, eyes soft and open, looking at Shane like he was both the cause of and the cure for all his pain.

Carefully, he eased out of him.

Shane hissed at the drag, the sudden emptiness. Ilya's face tightened at once.

"Sorry." He said. "Sorry. I will get cloth."

He slid off the bed with more grace than Shane would have managed on his best day and padded over to the washing stand, moving with the slow heaviness of a man whose own legs were not entirely trusting him yet. He wetted a soft cloth in warm water, wrung it out, then came back.

"Let me, please." He said.

Shane might have protested on principle on another night. Pride would have got in the way. Right now, he was too wrung out to do anything but nod.

Ilya cleaned him with gentle, efficient strokes, wiping away the sticky mess on his stomach and thighs, murmuring soft nothings when Shane flinched at a particularly tender spot. He pressed a kiss to the inside of Shane's knee once, unthinking, then seemed to realise what he'd done and smiled to himself.

Once he was satisfied, he tossed the cloth aside and climbed back into bed, tugging the blankets up around them. He pulled Shane carefully into his chest, arranging them so that Shane's head rested on his shoulder, his body half draped over Ilya's. It put less strain on his injured arm and more weight across his chest, which he seemed to like, if the contented sigh he let out was any indication.

Shane went willingly, the warmth of Ilya's skin and the steady thump of his heart under his ear the best pillow he'd ever had.

The fire crackled. Outside, the wind howled and clawed at the stones. Inside, everything was quiet.

Sleep crept up on him, soft and heavy. The last thing he was aware of before it took him was the feeling of Ilya's lips pressing against the top of his head, and the quiet, fervent whisper, half in Rozanovan, half in Hollandian, of his name and the words 'I love you'.

He let himself fall.

End Notes

Thank you so so so so much for making it all the way to the end.

Originally, I was going to end on the morning after, with the sweetest, most tooth-rotting fluff you've ever read. In writing though, I felt like it was better to end where we did.

That said... I'm sure I could be persuaded to write it if people would like me to :)

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